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Association Communications Benchmarking Report

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ASSOCIATION COMMUNICATIONS BENCHMARKING STUDY 2017

Naylor Association Solutions has been a leader in helping trade associations and professional societies across North America get the most out of their member communication programs for nearly 50 years. As part of our commitment to the take AIM—assess, integrate and measure approaches to member communications, Naylor has partnered since 2011 with more than a dozen of the state allied society of association executives to conduct one of the most comprehensive annual studies that focuses exclusively on the communication strategies and best practices of membership organizations.

More than 2,000 senior leaders of North American trade associations, professional societies and association management companies have completed our comprehensive online surveys over the last six years. Respondents, representing a mix of small, midsize and large organizations across a variety of industries, have a wide range of communication challenges but one thing in common: While they have more tools available to communicate, their members (and prospective members) have never been harder to reach, harder to impress or more likely to question the value of their membership. In a fast-changing association landscape, the challenges shift often.

Year-over-year findings highlight associations' progress, but also their continued challenges.

Associations greatly underestimated communication overload and clutter.

Social media frequency surpassed traditional online communications, and improvements were made in "cutting through the clutter" and targeting/segmentation.

2011   **2012-2013***   **2014**   **2015**   **2016**

Associations believed they were doing a better job of integrating their communications than they actually were.

Associations that integrated their communications were more effectively engaging members.

Generating non-dues revenue (NDR) from communications appears to be a greater problem. Factors that could have a positive impact on NDR generation, such as utilizing technologies across the organization to improve customization for member subgroups, are not being fully leveraged.

2017

For the first time in our study's six-year history, the "inability to communicate member benefits effectively" eclipsed "information overload/communication clutter" as the No.1 communication challenge for associations.

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
* The 2012–'13 benchmarking study was based on a single survey that started in late 2012 and finished in early 2013.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

This report reflects survey results through June 4, 2017. The survey remains open all year for individuals who would like to participate. Adding to the data set is not only good for enhancing the industry's body of knowledge, but it also allows you to compare the communication practices of your organization to the practices of peer groups. Participants also are able to compare themselves against a set of communication best practices by taking the survey and then downloading their unique best practices report card. For a comprehensive look at all of this year's results and to get your best practices report card, **log onto communicationsbenchmark.naylor.com**.

Associations are communicating more frequently, and with a wider variety of tools, but not more effectively.

It may come as no surprise that associations are communicating with members more frequently and via more channels than at any time since we began this survey in 2011. On average, associations communicate with members an estimated 31 times per month (via print, online, social media and video) vs. 30 times per month in 2016 and 26 times per month in 2015. However, the frequency with which they use various channels has changed. In a reversal of 2016 findings, print and video now are being used more frequently than they were a year ago. Online/digital and social media also are being used more frequently than they were a year ago, but only slightly more.

Despite the increasing *frequency* of member communication touches overall, many associations say they struggle to relay their membership value proposition. Not surprisingly, associations report that their communication teams increasingly feel understaffed.
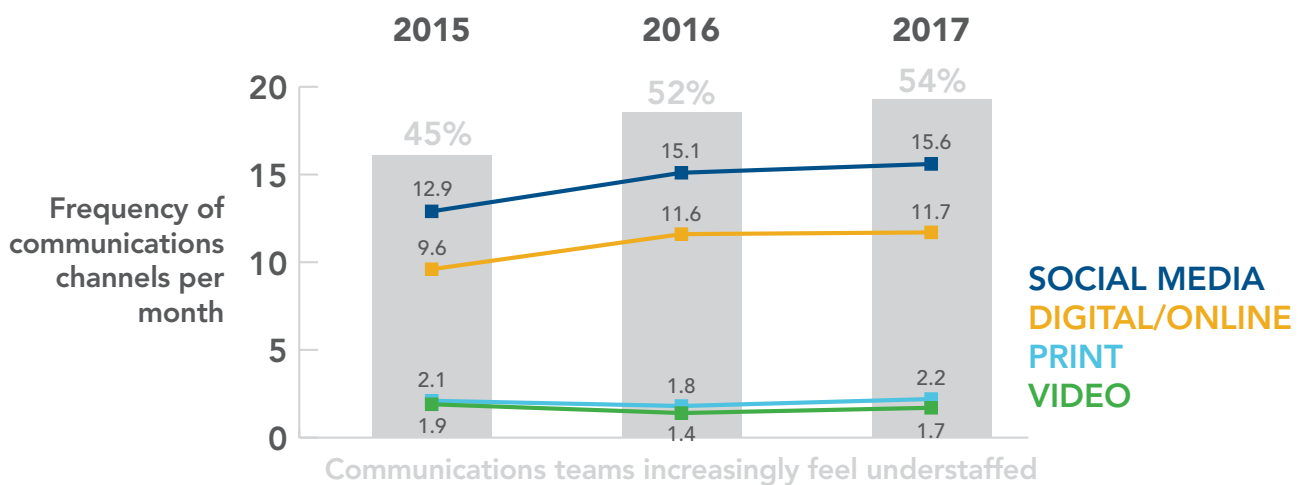
Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

The majority of associations still struggle to become more efficient and more effective communicators.

For the first time in the the six-year history of this study, **information overload/ communication clutter** was NOT the most frequently cited communication challenge, supplanted in 2017 by **inability to communicate member benefits effectively**. These two longstanding challenges were cited by two-thirds of respondents in 2017, and once again, more than half of respondents cited challenges with **engaging young professionals and customizing for member segments**. Another new Top-5 challenge in 2017 was **inability to produce consistent video**, rising two spots in importance from 2016. Additionally, for the first time in many years, **overcoming technical barriers (spam filters, etc.)** was NOT a Top-5 communication challenge.

Top 5 Communication Challenges	2011 (first year)	2016 (last year)	2017 (this year)
Communicating member benefits effectively	32%	67%	68%
Combatting information overload/cutting through the clutter	54%	69%	66%
Engaging young professionals	n/a	55%	54%
Customizing for member segments	23%	55%	52%
Ability to consistently produce video	n/a	42%	45%

Additional Communication Challenges	2011 (first year)	2016 (last year)	2017 (this year)
Overcoming technical barriers (e.g. spam filters, etc.)	n/a	45%	41%
Facilitating member-to-member communication	n/a	43%	40%
Helping members find desired info. quickly	n/a	33%	39%
Maintaining position as industry's No. 1 info. source	28%	42%	35%
Communicating legislative, regulatory, technical updates	13%	23%	30%
Keeping members informed about new events and continuing education	14%	21%	30%
Providing mobile-friendly communications	n/a	34%	28%

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

Noteworthy Numbers

ADVERTISING, SPONSORSHIP & MEASUREMENT

2 out of 5 felt their inability to generate non-dues revenue (NDR) from their communications was a serious or significant challenge

Noteworthy improvement from 54% in 2016, but still a significant long-term challenge when compared to 2011 (11%)

2 out of 5 thought their inability to measure their communications' effectiveness was a serious or significant problem (at least 4 on a scale of 5)

Down (encouragingly) from 54% in 2016

3 out of 4 had at least some type of process for measuring member engagement

Only 17% felt they have a good understanding of their reader, member and advertiser needs

STRATEGY

50% indicated they conduct member communication surveys every 12-24 months

Only 1 in 4 have a department-specific or platform-specific content strategy. Nearly half (46%) rely on a one-size-fits all content strategy

28% gave themselves a rating of at least 4 out of 5 when asked how well their communications channels were integrated

Nearly 2 out of 5 said they need to improve their ability to measure integration across all platforms

Only 1 in 3 felt they were communicating too often with members

CUSTOMIZATION

More than 3 out of 5 customize for new members

Only 1 in 3 believe they are effectively leveraging their member database/ AMS to deliver a customized member experience

Nearly half customize for young professionals

Less than 3 out of 5 customize for any other segment of professionals

Only 20% feel they are effectively leveraging their career center, content management system, learning management system or marketing automation system to deliver a customized member experience

1 in 4 felt their inability to measure their communications effectiveness was a serious or significant problem (at least 4 on a scale of 5)

Only 16% felt that "creating relevant content" was a challenge or significant challenge

Half felt they could improve their member engagement with their communications by improving their ability to customize for different subgroups

EFFECTIVENESS

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41% recognize a serious or significant problem with the **lack of revenue generated** from their communication vehicles
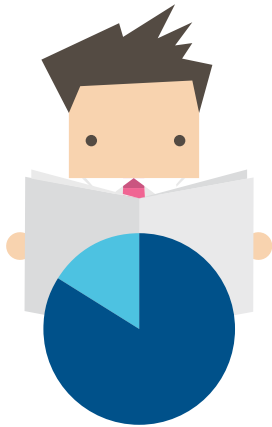
A strong majority (84%) believe they are good at creating relevant content, and half are conducting communication-specific surveys at least once every 12–24 months to stay on top of members' needs, **yet only 17% believe they have a good understanding of their reader, member and advertiser needs**

Although 56% believe they could improve member engagement by improving their ability to customize for different subgroups, **not many are actually doing it**

(see bottom of Page 16 for customization results)

As discussed later in this report, roughly **half of respondents felt they could be doing a better job of promoting their communications** as a member benefit and 2 out of 3 said members tell them they are "too busy" to engage with their communications

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

Staffing challenges still continue.

As can be expected in these "do more with less" times, half of respondents (51%) felt their organizations were understaffed overall and even more so within their communication departments—54% felt their publishing/content creation teams were understaffed, and 45% felt their social media teams were understaffed.

On a positive note...

- **Four areas** in which associations seem to be improving:
  - Overcoming technical communication barriers
  - Facilitating member-to-member communications
  - Maintaining position as industry's No.1 source
  - Providing mobile-friendly communications

- Legacy communication channels (live events, print magazines and e-newsletters) continue to be among the most highly rated member communication channels, with **live events remaining especially high for member engagement and for obtaining meaningful member feedback**.

- Both **printed and digital versions of the member magazine** showed a resurgence in perceived value among survey respondents.

- The portfolio of useful communication channels is expanding, and several new forms are gaining traction: **Facebook, webinars, online directory/buyers' guides and online career centers to name a few**.

More than half said if they got an unexpected 50% budget increase in their communications departments, they would invest in hiring more staff.

Noteworthy: even though fewer respondents indicated a need to invest in hiring in 2017, more respondents said they felt understaffed overall, particularly among their publishing/content creation teams.

Top 10 Individual Communication Channels

Channel	Consider very/extremely valuable	Average rating (5.0 Max)	Rank 2015	Rank 2016	Rank 2017
Traditional Conferences/Events	87%	4.53	1	1	1
Member Magazine (print)	68%	3.76	2	4	▲ 2
Member eNewsletter	66%	3.89	3	2	▼ 3
Webinars	63%	3.77	7	3	▼ 4
Leadership Development Events	63%	3.75	n/a	n/a	5
Facebook	57%	3.67	12	5	▼ 6
Twitter	54%	3.56	14	7t	7
Young Professional Events	53%	3.66	n/a	n/a	8
Online Member Directory	49%	3.45	11	6	▼ 9
Member eZine	47%	3.28	9	10	10
Online Career Center	44%	3.17	13	7t	▼ 12
Video	42%	3.14	18	9	▼ 15

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
Calculations vary based on total responses per channel.

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METHODOLOGY

After consulting with Naylor Association Solutions' senior management team, the Association Adviser team, and the executive directors of nearly a dozen allied state societies of association executives, Naylor's research team constructed a 41 question, online survey. As has been the case in previous annual studies, the 2017 survey intended to provide association leaders a comprehensive look at membership communication trends, best practices and resource investments that would be relevant for membership organizations of all sizes and industries throughout North America.

Nearly 30 percent of the 41 questions were new, and a proprietary rapid-response platform, first introduced to respondents in 2016, was again used to administer this year's survey. For multiple-choice questions, respondents were asked to check a single answer that best described their opinion about an association communication channel or issue or to select all answers that applied to their experience with an association communication challenge or issue. In many cases, respondents were asked to state the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with a question or statement, generally on a scale of 1 through 5.

Great care was taken to ensure that the survey would be thorough and comprehensive, yet still simple enough to be completed quickly without the need for expensive incentives, telephone follow-up or substantial reminders to take part. In exchange for their participation, all respondents who completed the survey received a $10 Amazon gift card and priority access to the results.

In several waves between April 25, 2017 and June 4, 2017, researchers sent the survey via email to senior staff at North American trade associations, professional societies and association management companies. The respondent pool was composed of Naylor clients and prospects (a mix of small, medium and large associations), Association Societies Alliance members in 11 states, readers of Association Adviser e-newsletter and viewers of Association Adviser TV.
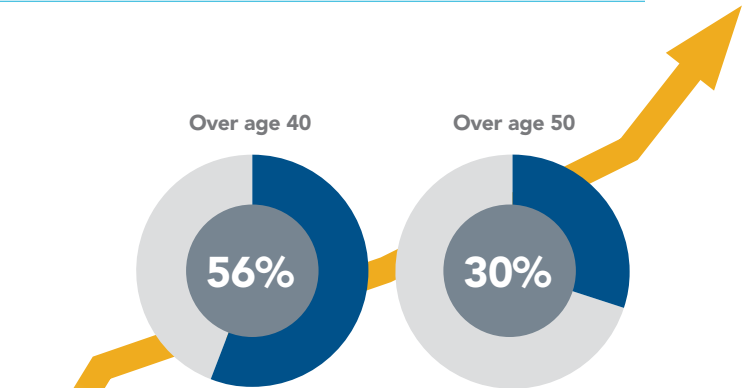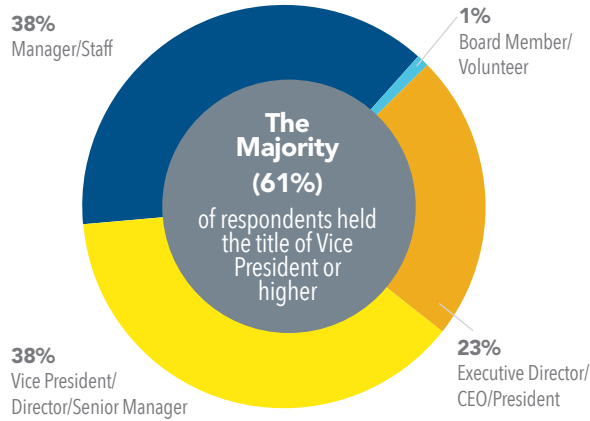
To ensure a response pool of experienced association executives and managers, recipients were asked to forward the survey link to the most senior member of their department or organization if they did not feel they met the criteria for "senior management." Follow-up reminder emails were sent to all prospective survey participants one week and two weeks after they received the initial survey invitation. When the survey closed on June 4, 2017, a total of 506 surveys had been satisfactorily completed, with nearly two-thirds (61%) coming from those who were at the level of vice president or above.

As indicated in the highlights section, this report reflects survey results through June 2017, but the survey will remain open throughout the year so additional association decision-makers have the opportunity to participate. As was the case in 2017, participants also were able to compare themselves against a set of communication best practices by downloading their unique best practices report card after taking the survey.
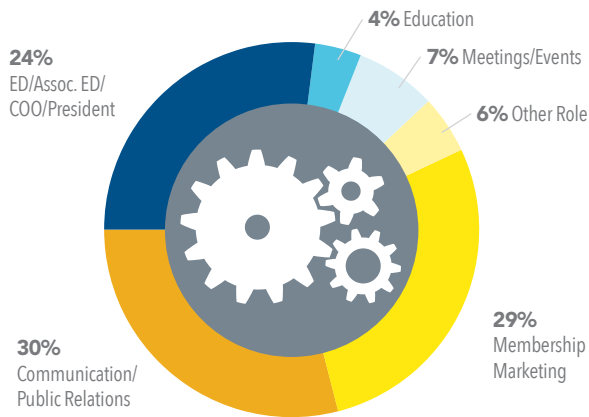
DEMOGRAPHICS

Job Title

38%
Manager/Staff

1%
Board Member/
Volunteer

The Majority (61%) of respondents held the title of Vice President or higher

38%
Vice President/
Director/Senior Manager

23%
Executive Director/
CEO/President

Over age 40

56%

Over age 50

30%

The majority of respondents (56%) were over age 40 and 30% over age 50, which is consistent with the C-suite demographic characteristics of senior association professionals

Primary Job Function

4% Education

7% Meetings/Events

24%
ED/Assoc. ED/
COO/President

6% Other Role

30%
Communication/
Public Relations

29%
Membership
Marketing

More than 2 out of 3

Respondents had job functions that required frequent, direct member contact and communication skills: membership, marketing, communications, public relations and meeting/event planning

100 Different Industries

Respondents came from more than 100 different industries, although five classifications accounted for nearly half (48%) of the response pool:

Healthcare
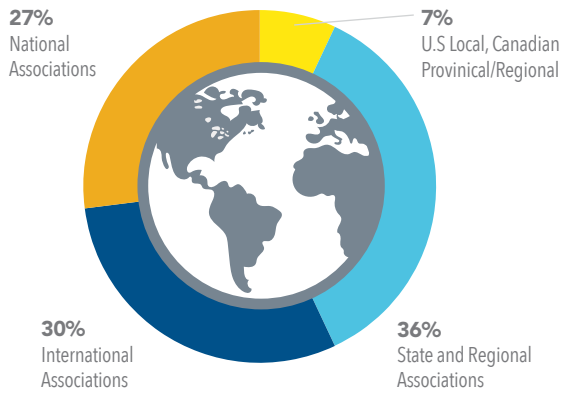
Education

Building & construction
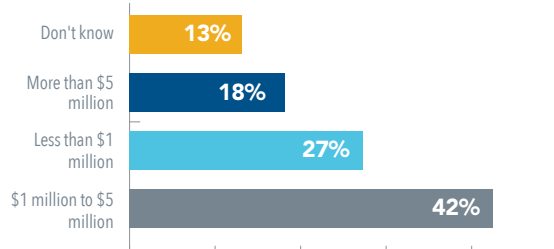
Association management companies (AMCs)

Industrial/ manufacturing

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

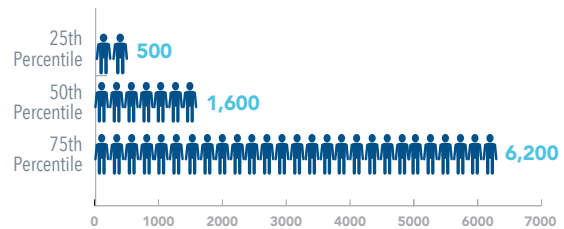# Typical respondents mirror the association world at large.

27%
National Associations

7%
U.S Local, Canadian Provinical/Regional

30%
International Associations

36%
State and Regional Associations

Annual Operating Budget

Don't know	**13%**
More than $5 million	**18%**
Less than $1 million	**27%**
$1 million to $5 million	**42%**

42% came from organizations with annual operating budgets of between **$1 million and $5 million.**

Organization Type

43%
Trade Associations

4%
Association Management Company (AMC)

46%
Professional Society

7%
Supplier/Other
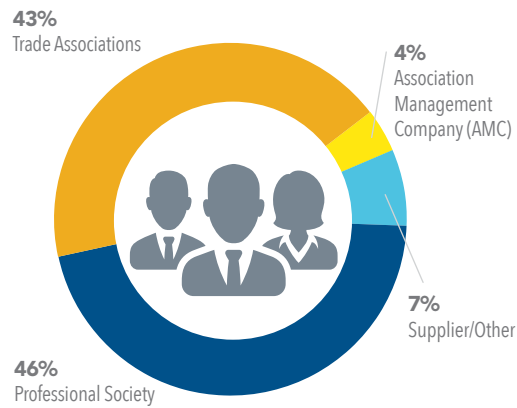
The median 50% of respondents came from organizations of between 500 and 6,200 members.

They were about equally split between **trade associations** (43%) and **professional societies** (46%).

Number of Association Members

25th Percentile	500
50th Percentile	1,600
75th Percentile	6,200

0   1000   2000   3000   4000   5000   6000   7000

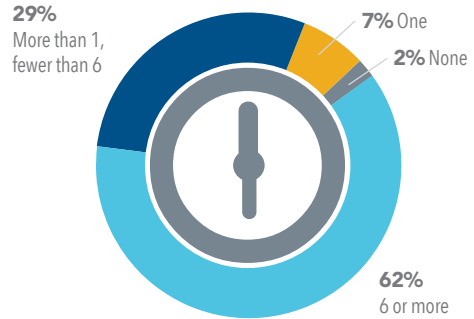*Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey*

STAFFING

Nearly 2 in 3 came from organizations with six or more full-time staff

About 1/3 had between one and five full-time staff on payroll

9% had one full-time staff member

Overall Association Staffing Adequacy

2% Overstaffed

51% Understaffed

47% Just right
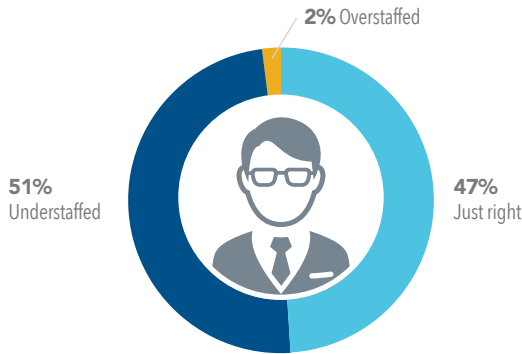
Total Staff (in Full-Time Employees [FTEs])

29% More than 1, fewer than 6

7% One

2% None

62% 6 or more

When it came to individual communication functions, respondents were more likely to feel their publishing/content creation teams were more understaffed than their social media teams—even though social media teams had, on average, fewer full-time staff.

	1 or fewer FTEs	Feel understaffed
Publishing/ Content Creation	46% (2017)	54% (2017)
	58% (2016)	52% (2016)
	52% (2015)	45% (2015)
Social Media	73% (2017)	45% (2017)
	76% (2016)	45% (2016)
	69% (2015)	44% (2015)

Communication functions most likely to be outsourced

Production design **31%**
Advertising sales **28%**
Video production **26%**
Magazines **22%**
Directory **16%**
Social media **6%**

*Note: Total exceeds 100% due to multiple response options*

NOTE: As we will see later in this report, midsize organizations are most likely to feel understaffed (62%) and 3 in 4 respondents (76%) said their primary social media person spends less than half of their time on social media.

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

COMMUNICATION PLANNING

*The earmark of a successful association communication program is one that has a staff willing to take the time to develop a comprehensive plan. The following section reviews a few takeaways from the communication planning section of this year's study. For a comprehensive look at results of all data, log onto **communicationsbenchmark.naylor.com**.*

Communication Strategy Takeaways
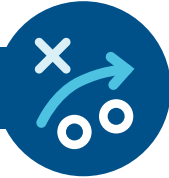
Nearly 50% of respondents say they have a single strategy for communicating with all members.

Communication Strategies for Member Engagement

46% have a single strategy for communicating with all members

28% have a platform-specific strategy

26% have a department-specific strategy
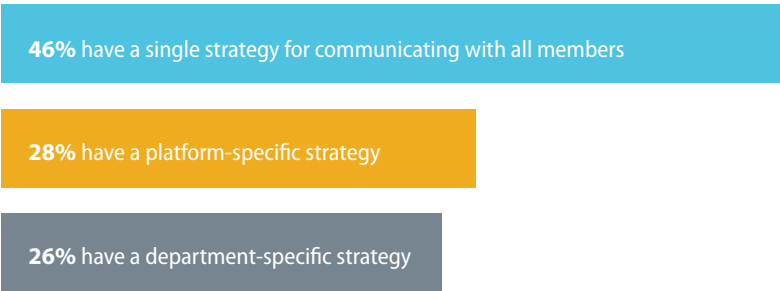
Print remains viable even in this digital age. 1 in 3 associations still communicate with members multiple times per month via print.

Monthly Print Communication Frequency

15% 2-3 times

13% 4-10 times

68% 1 time or less
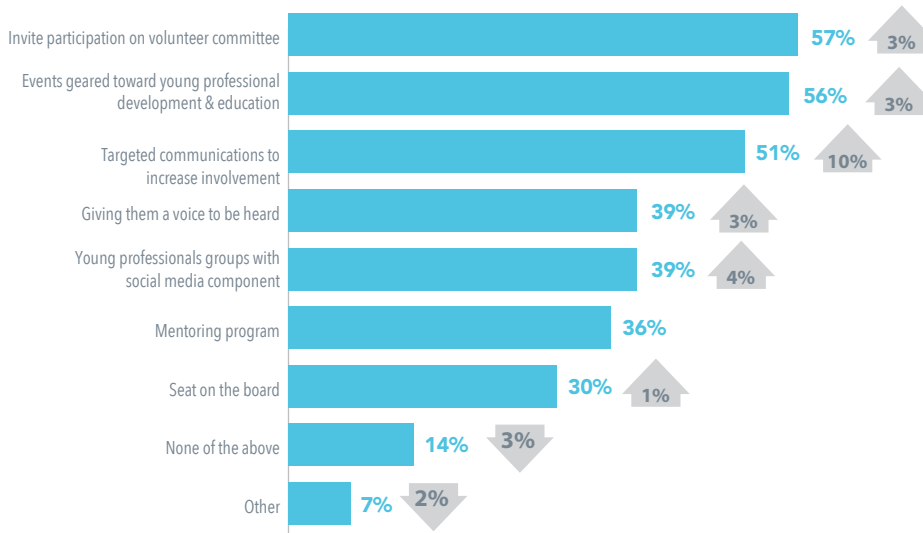
2% Don't know

2% 11 times or less
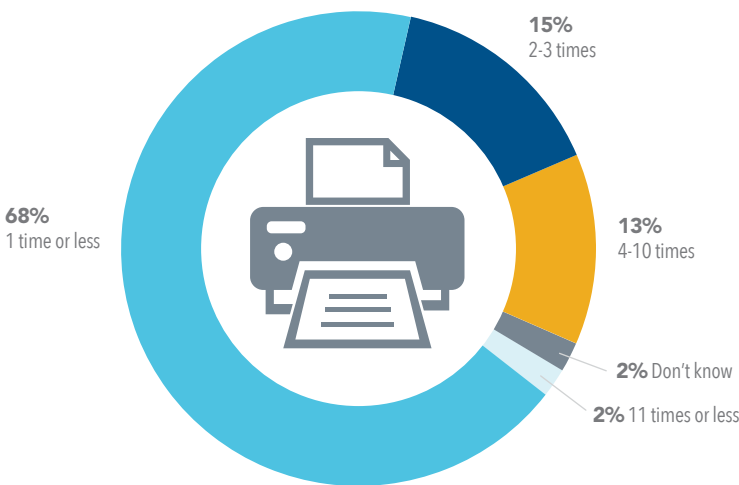
The print version of the member magazine is now the second-most highly valued member communication channel, up from No.4 in 2016

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

When engaging next-generation members, the most widely used tactics are not necessarily social/mobile:

- Creating communications targeted to younger members (51%). ▲ 3%
- Inviting them to participate on volunteer committees (57%). ▲ 3%
- Gearing events toward young professional education and development (56%). ▲ 10%
- Offering mentoring programs (36%).

Association Approach to Next-Generation Member Engagement

Category	Value	Change
Invite participation on volunteer committee	57%	▲ 3%
Events geared toward young professional development & education	56%	▲ 3%
Targeted communications to increase involvement	51%	▲ 10%
Giving them a voice to be heard	39%	▲ 3%
Young professionals groups with social media component	39%	▲ 4%
Mentoring program	36%	
Seat on the board	30%	▲ 1%
None of the above	14%	▼ 3%
Other	7%	▼ 2%

Association professionals remain prudent about their communication budgets:

The focus is on improving the quality of existing vehicles, including social media and video (and staffing accordingly), rather than on new launches, technologies and mobile.

	2015	2016	2017	1 Yr Chg
Improve quality of existing communication vehicles	53%	54%	52%	–2%
Hire more staff	46%	53%	51%	–2%
Upgrade publishing tools, technologies or processes	47%	54%	43%	–11%
Provide more robust video	n/a	n/a	42%	n/a
Put more muscle behind social media	32%	31%	41%	+10%
Improve mobile strategy	39%	48%	39%	–9%
Launch new communication vehicles	27%	26%	29%	+3%

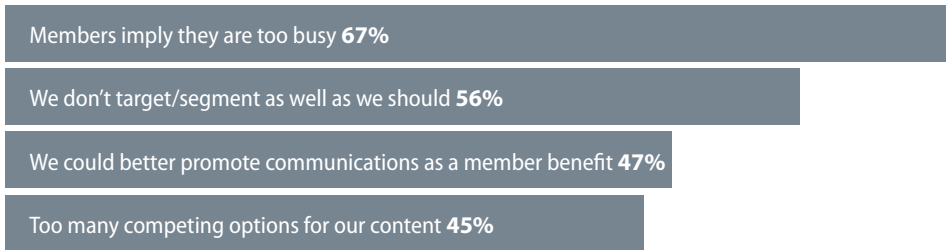*Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey*

Communication Effectiveness Takeaways

For the first time, communicating member benefits effectively takes over as the No. 1 communication challenge.
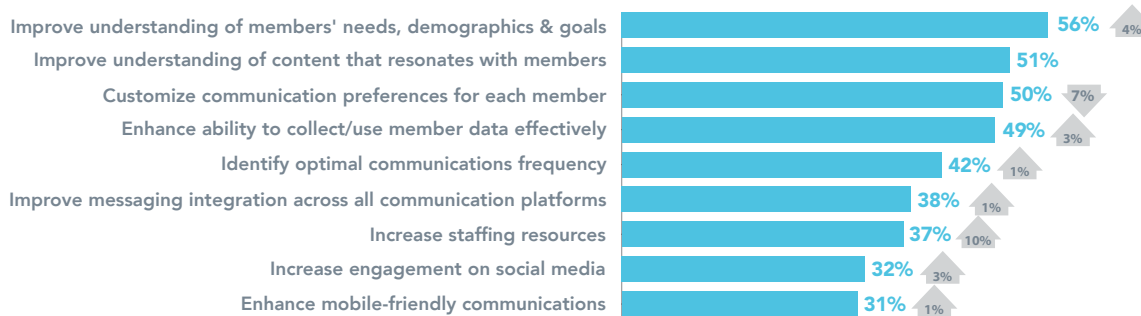
Top 5 Communication Challenges	2011 (first year)	2016 (last year)	2017 (this year)
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Combating information overload/cutting through the clutter	54%	69%	66%
Engaging young professionals	n/a	55%	54%
Customizing for member segments	23%	55%	52%
Produce video consistently	n/a	42%	45%

Top reasons for declining reader engagement

Members imply they are too busy **67%**	
We don't target/segment as well as we should **56%**	
We could better promote communications as a member benefit **47%**	
Too many competing options for our content **45%**	

In 2016 we learned that 4 in 5 associations (80%) said that **at least half of their communications are being ignored,** showing a substantial unfavorable increase from the 59% response in 2015. In 2017, we attempted to understand why.

Majority of resources/strategies needed to increase member engagement center around understanding their needs, goals, demographics and preferences.

Improve understanding of members' needs, demographics & goals	56%	4%
Improve understanding of content that resonates with members	51%	
Customize communication preferences for each member	50%	7%
Enhance ability to collect/use member data effectively	49%	3%
Identify optimal communications frequency	42%	1%
Improve messaging integration across all communication platforms	38%	1%
Increase staffing resources	37%	10%
Increase engagement on social media	32%	3%
Enhance mobile-friendly communications	31%	1%

More than half felt they could improve member engagement with their communications by:

- improving their understanding of members needs, demographics and goals
- better understanding what makes content relevant to members
- improving their ability to customize communication for each member
- enhancing their ability to collect and use member data more effectively

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

Communication Customization Takeaways

Most Important Topic to Members

As has been the case in recent years, career-related topics continue to gain prominence among the most important topics to members.

Topic	Rank 2016	Rank 2017
Network with Industry Peers	2	1
Career/Professional Development	3	2
How to/Best Practice	1	3
Industry News/Trends	4	4
Lobbying/Advocacy	5	5
Information about Products/Resources	7	6
Programs for Young Professionals	10	7
Technology	6	8
Coverage of Key Industry Events	9	9
Member News	8	10
Industry Job Openings	11	11
Succession Planning	13	12
Data/Stats for Improving Job Performance	12	13

BIGGEST GAINERS

#1 Networking with Industry Peers

#2 Career/ Professional Development

How-to/Best Practices

FELL FROM **#1** TO **#3**

Best Ways to Gauge Member Needs

7 out of 8
(▲13% from 2016)
face-to-face interaction at live events or their annual meeting.

2 out of 3
(no change from 2016)
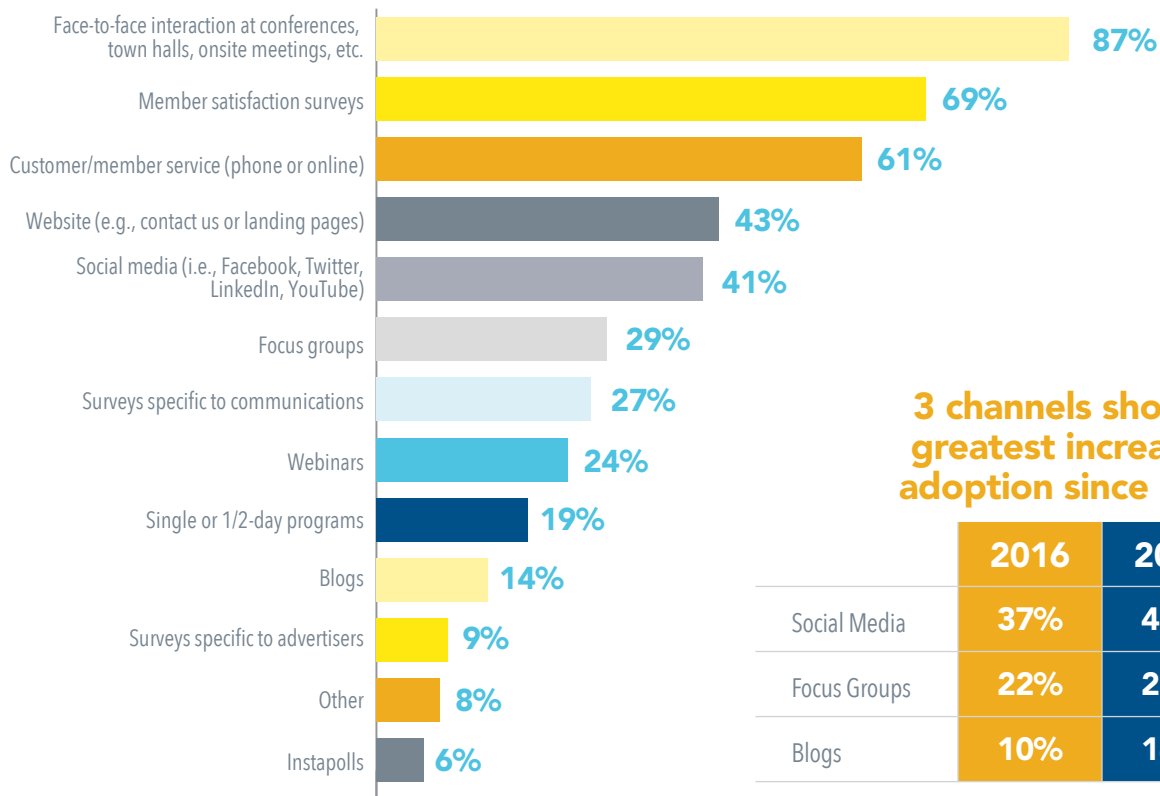member satisfaction surveys or member service calls/emails.

2 out of 5
(no change from 2016)
social media or the association website.

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

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Associations use a variety of vehicles and tools to determine member needs.

Vehicle/Tool	Percentage
Face-to-face interaction at conferences, town halls, onsite meetings, etc.	87%
Member satisfaction surveys	69%
Customer/member service (phone or online)	61%
Website (e.g., contact us or landing pages)	43%
Social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube)	41%
Focus groups	29%
Surveys specific to communications	27%
Webinars	24%
Single or 1/2-day programs	19%
Blogs	14%
Surveys specific to advertisers	9%
Other	8%
Instapolls	6%

Note: Total exceeds 100% due to multiple response options.

3 channels showing greatest increase in adoption since 2016

	2016	2017
Social Media	37%	41%
Focus Groups	22%	29%
Blogs	10%	14%

Associations still need to work on customizing communications for important member subgroups, although improvement was registered in most areas we measured.

NEW MEMBERS
20% highly customized
42% somewhat

EARLY CAREER MEMBERS (<2 YEARS)
7% highly customized
28% somewhat

MID-CAREER MEMBERS (5–10 YEARS)
5% highly customized
17% somewhat

LONGSTANDING MEMBERS (10+ YEARS)
4% highly customized
19% somewhat

STUDENT MEMBERS
Highly customized 11%
Somewhat customized 23%

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

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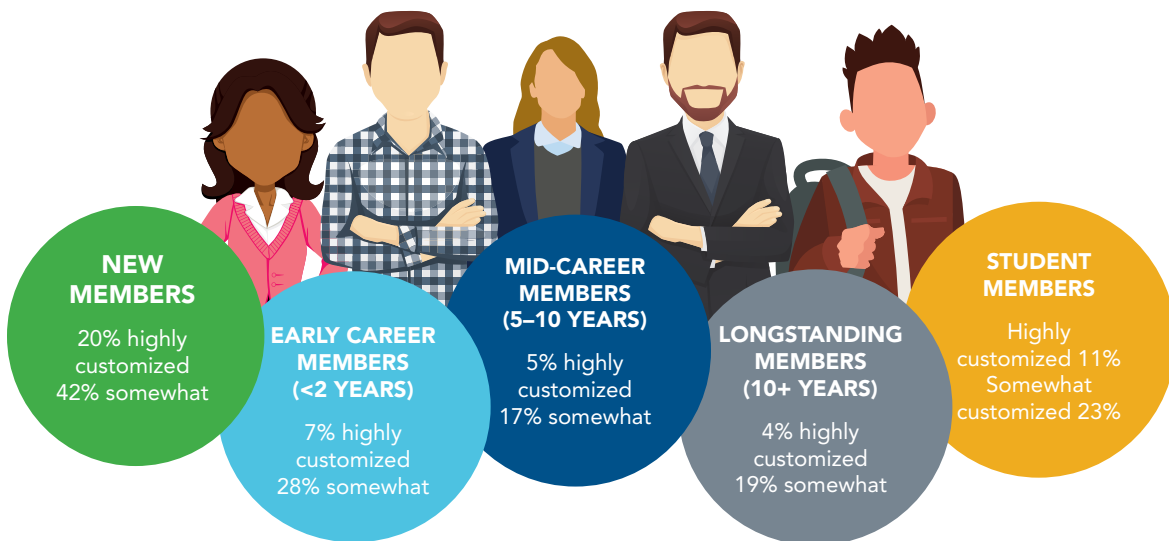
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While technology is not being fully leveraged to deliver a customized experience, there appears to have been improvement in all major areas since 2016.

Respondents utilize the below technologies to deliver a customized member communication experience.

Email Marketing System	**43% (+9%)**
Member Database/AMS	**31% (+3%)**
Career Center	**17% (+2%)**
Content Management System (CMS)	**31% (+4%)**
Learning Management System (LMS)	**17% (+5%)**
Marketing Automation System	**13% (+6%)**

Advertising, Sponsorship and Measurement Takeaways

43% Offer some customization (mostly for best partners)

43% Survey their advertisers/sponsors annually

15% Fully customize for each sponsor

Again, a promising number of associations hit the "sweet spot" for member communication surveys.

50% Survey their members at least every 12–24 months in an effort to improve their communications.

Why aren't advertisers and sponsors being surveyed at least annually?

28% said they don't have the resources to provide metrics

17% said they don't have the resources to address issues that might be raised

Associations typically are not using enough data points for measuring engagement.

2x as many in 2017

3 in 4

have at least some type of process for measuring member engagement–*more than twice as many as in 2016.*

For those who try to measure, a select number of factors are generally used in their calculation. The following engagement factors (out of more than a dozen) were cited by at least **2 in 5 respondents:**
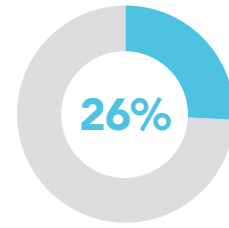
Attendance at events (65%)

Committee participation (44%)

Membership tenure (40%)

26%

26% of respondents said their organizations had *NO PROCESS* for measuring engagement

Engagement factors cited by at least 1 in 4 of respondents:

Interacting with our social media channels (31%)

Number of visits to our website (29%)

Continuing education credits (23%)

Attendance at local chapter meetings (23%)

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

COMMUNICATION VEHICLES

Top 5 Individual Communication Channels

CHANNEL	% Consider Very/ Extremely Valuable	Average Rating 5.0 Max
Traditional Conferences/Events	87%	4.53
Member Magazine (print)	68%	3.89
Member eNewsletter	66%	3.77
Webinars	63%	3.76
Leadership Development Events	63%	3.75

Calculations vary based on total responses per channel.

Live events remain at the top while virtual events make a gain.

Perceived Value of Various Event Types

Traditional Events	**87%** Very/Extremely Valuable
Appointment-Setting Events	**35%** Very/Extremely Valuable
Virtual Events	**34%** Very/Extremely Valuable

Noteworthy: Nearly twice as many as in 2016 reported virtual events as very/extremely valuable

Most important effective vehicles used for driving traffic to association website

86% Social Media	80% Email	60% Education offerings	46% Job Board	45% Free resources

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

NAYLOR
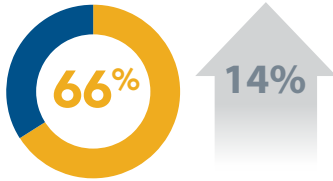ASSOCIATION SOLUTIONS
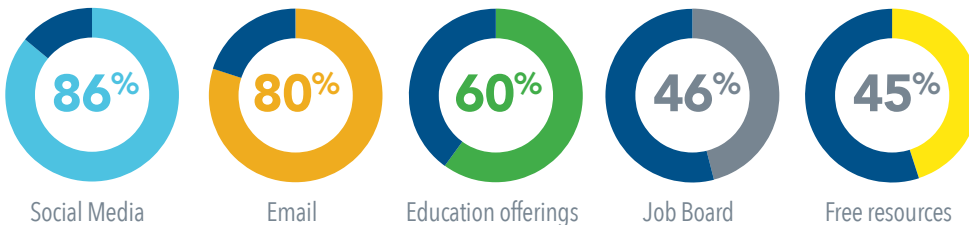
Association Adviser

The Gap

Despite social media's effectiveness for driving traffic to association websites, only 22% of respondents feel their organization has its social media strategy well defined and only 28% strongly agree that social media is a high priority for their organization.
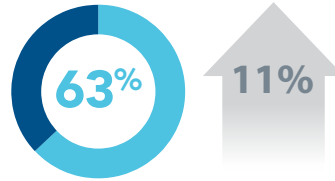
ADDITIONAL METRICS

Video Is Captured at Your Live Events

66% **14%**

Agree/Somewhat Agree

Offer Leadership Development and Events for Young Professionals

63% **11%**

Very/Extremely Important

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that association communication priorities have been changing since we published our first report in 2011. However, adapting to those changes and measuring progress against those changes has been an uphill battle for many associations.

Integrating member communications continues to be challenges, although more associations report improvement in this area in recent years. However, our 2017 survey found that only 28 percent of respondents gave themselves a rating of 4 or 5 (on a 5-point scale) when asked how well their communications were integrated. Clearly this shortcoming remains a challenge.

For this first time since our study began in 2011, "cutting through the clutter" was NOT the No.1 communication challenge associations said they faced. While clutter is still a significant challenge, the inability to "communicate member benefits effectively" replaced clutter as the most widely cited communication challenge (more than two-thirds of respondents agreed).

In the year since our 2016 study was published, we found that associations have NOT been doing a better job of organizing their information for members or making it more accessible. Nor have associations improved their ability to keep members informed about new events, continuing education opportunities or timely legislative, regulatory and technical updates. Nearly half of associations (45%) told us they still struggle to produce video content consistently—making video creation one of the Top-5 association communication challenges of 2017. On the bright side, associations seem to be showing modest improvement in the following important areas:

- Overcoming technical communication barriers (e.g. spam filters);
- Facilitating member to member communication;
- Maintaining their position as their industry's No.1 source of information; and
- Providing mobile friendly communications.

On average, associations are communicating with members an estimated 31 times per month via print, online, social media and video alone. That's a continued increase from 30 times per month in 2016 and 26 times per month in 2015. But more communication is not necessarily better communication. Almost half of respondents (45%) indicated that their members felt they have "too many competing sources of information" to choose from, so it's essential to make every message count. While associations appreciate the importance of segmenting member data to provide tailored communications designed to combat "information overload," only three in five (62%) said they also customize their communications for new members, and only one-third (or fewer) customize content for other important member segments such as early-career members, student members, mid-career members and longstanding members. Unfortunately, even in 2017, only a modest percentage of respondents indicated that their organizations are leveraging technology effectively for segmentation purposes. For instance, less than half of respondents said they are using email marketing systems; less than one-third are using member database/AMS systems; and just one in six are using career centers, content management systems, learning management systems or marketing automation systems.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps that's why half of respondents in 2017 felt that their publishing, content creation and social media teams were understaffed and that almost half of respondents (47%) agreed with the statement: "We could do a better job of promoting our communications as a member benefit."

It may be no surprise that the number of communication channels associations use to reach members is also expanding. Webinars, Facebook and Twitter now rank among the Top-7 communication channels (out of 28 we measured). That said, legacy communication channels, including live events (ranked No.1), print magazines (No. 2) and e-newsletters (No.3), continue to be the most highly rated member communications channels. It's a simple fact–different people want to consume information differently, so embracing multiple channels is imperative to remaining relevant and engaging.

Another ongoing challenge has been associations' inability to engage young professionals. Segmentation and customization of communications plays a significant role here. The millennial generation is accustomed to looking online for whatever it needs—and expects to find it instantly. Associations need to develop specific events, communications and mentoring opportunities unique to younger members and prospective members. There were some noteworthy signs of improvement in this area in 2017. Leadership development conferences and events for young professionals both ranked among the 10 most valued communication channels in 2017 (out of 28 measured) and more than one-third of respondents (36%) said they now offer mentoring programs for Next-Gen members.

Tracking the degree to which members are engaging–and using that information to deliver future communication–is really where *effective* communication is evolving. The simplest example is removing people who have registered for an event or webinar from future marketing communications about that event. Nearly half of associations now are using email metrics to measure member engagement, and two in five are mining data from their website (contact, landing pages), or social media platforms. However, only one in five (22%) said they have a clearly defined social media strategy in place. Further, only one in four have either a platform-specific or department-specific communication strategy in place. Despite all the technological and data management tools that have emerged since we began publishing this report in 2011, nearly three in five respondents agreed they have to do a better job of "understanding member needs, demographics and goals." Half of respondents agreed they have to do a better job of understanding why certain content "resonates with members," or do a better job of "customizing communication preferences" for each member. They also admit they need to enhance their ability to "collect and use data." Take another step and track the types of communications members are viewing. Are they engaging with you on career development topics, advocacy topics or peer networking opportunities? Associations must better understand each member's interests, then send targeted communications about those relevant topics and less information about one-size-fits-all topics that are no longer as relevant to members as they were in previous years.

CONCLUSIONS

For instance, respondents indicated that members now are increasingly concerned about career enhancement topics and less concerned about such staples as member news, industry news, event coverage and lobbying/advocacy. "networking with industry peers" and "career/professional development" emerged in 2017 as the two most important topics to members, supplanting "how to/best practices", "industry news/trends", "lobbying advocacy" , "member news" and "coverage of key industry events" among others.

Also rising in the rankings of most important topics to members were: "programs for young professionals" and "industry job openings." Further, this trend is not just occurring on the younger end of the age spectrum. The importance of "succession planning" saw a double-digit percentage point increase over the past 12 months.

Last, but certainly not least, there was notable concern over associations' inability to generate non-dues revenue from their communication vehicles—more two in five respondents (41%) agreed that this was a serious or significant problem. In fact, advertising sales was the second most likely function to be outsourced by associations. Less than half of respondents said they are able to customize their advertising and sponsorship offerings for even their best partners. What's more, only two in five (43%) check with their sponsors even once per year to see if they feel they are getting their money's worth. All of the communication elements outlined in this report can have both a positive and negative effect on an association's ability to generate advertising and sponsorship dollars. By employing a process of **Assessment, Integration and Measurement** (AIM) throughout a communication vehicle's lifespan, associations will begin to see improvement in this area as well.

When you look at these results and compare them against today's communication best practices, associations seem reasonably aware of their shortcomings and are making progress, but there is still much room for improvement.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

(listed alphabetically)

Jill Andreu, Vice President of Content Strategy and Development, is responsible for the overall strategy, leadership and management of Naylor's content department. Jill is also responsible for execution of Content 360, a fee-based program that provides content strategy and leadership to the association marketplace, and gap analysis, a survey process to help associations improve their communications. Jill is a frequent speaker on topics ranging from communications best practices to young professional engagement. In her 14-year Naylor career, she has worked in editorial, business development, account management and association research roles, providing consultation to more than 100 associations. Jill has a journalism degree from the University of Florida.

Hank Berkowitz, MBA, M.A. has more than 20 years of experience as an online editor, publisher and content strategist. Prior to joining Naylor's research team, Hank co-founded and ran day-to-day operations of the CPA Insider™ e-newsletter group at the 365,000-member American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA). Earlier he founded the SECrets e-newsletter group at EDGAR Online, Inc. (1.2 million weekly readers), and he has held editorial and management positions with *Pensions & Investments Magazine*, CFO.com/Economist Group and CCH, a Wolters Kluwer Company.

Dave Bornmann is the Chief Marketing Officer at Naylor Association Solutions where his areas of responsibility include branding, marketing strategy, segmentation, online marketing, product marketing and social media. Dave manages communications programs for Naylor at the corporate level in addition to communications for all of Naylor's six lines of business. Additionally, he has oversight of the *Association Adviser* media properties that include a website, enewsletter, TV channel and print publication focused on strategies and best practices for association executives. He has a marketing MBA from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and a BA in economics from Swarthmore College.

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If you would like assistance conducting a communication gap analysis in your market, contact Jill Andreu (jandreu@naylor.com) today for more information.

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