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.**

![Diagram showing changes over years]

- **2011**: Associations believed they were doing a better job of integrating their communications than they actually were.
- **2012-2013**: Associations greatly underestimated communication overload and clutter.
- **2014**: Social media frequency surpassed traditional online communications, and improvements were made in “cutting through the clutter” and targeting/segmentation.
- **2015**: Associations that integrated their communications were more effectively engaging members.
- **2016**: 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.*
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.
The majority of associations still struggle to become more efficient and more effective communicators.

For the first time in 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
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<th>2017 (this year)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicating member benefits effectively</td>
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<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combatting information overload/cutting through the clutter</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging young professionals</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customizing for member segments</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to consistently produce video</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Additional Communication Challenges

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

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
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

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

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

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 half (46%) rely on a one-size-fits all content strategy

Only 1 in 4 have a department-specific or platform-specific content strategy. Nearly half (46%) customize for new members

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 communications channels were integrated

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

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

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

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

More than 3 out of 5 customize for new members

Nearly half customize for young professionals

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CUSTOMIZATION

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
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.

### Top 10 Individual Communication Channels

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

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

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:
Typical respondents mirror the association world at large.

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

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%).

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
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.

### 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.

### 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.*
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 time or less</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 times</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-10 times</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 times or less</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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%).
- Inviting them to participate on volunteer committees (57%).
- Gearing events toward young professional education and development (56%).
- Offering mentoring programs (36%).

Association Approach to Next-Generation Member Engagement

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.

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

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.

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<td>Engaging young professionals</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customizing for member segments</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce video consistently</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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.

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

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

- 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.

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

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Percentage (Change)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email Marketing System</td>
<td>43% (+9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Database/AMS</td>
<td>31% (+3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Center</td>
<td>17% (+2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Management System (CMS)</td>
<td>31% (+4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Management System (LMS)</td>
<td>17% (+5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Automation System</td>
<td>13% (+6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
Associations typically are not using enough data points for measuring engagement.

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%)

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

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

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

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

Source: Association Adviser Communications Benchmarking Survey
**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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Is Captured at Your Live Events</th>
<th>Offer Leadership Development and Events for Young Professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>66% Agree/Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>63% Very/Extremely Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

CONCLUSION
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.