



Recognizing innovative ideas and achievement in association communications

ASAE & The Center's Gold Circle Award Effective Communications Practices Guide 2009 Edition

Each year, the Gold Circle Award program recognizes excellence in association communications by honoring the outstanding communications projects of the previous year. *The Gold Circle Award Effective Communications Practices Guide*, updated annually, identifies the best practices of association communicators as demonstrated by the newest award recipients and their predecessors. ASAE & The Center's Communication Section Council, the sponsor of the Gold Circle Award competition, compiles these best practices to inspire association communicators to create effective, compelling, strategic and innovative communications programs. Here are some of the best practices that award winners used to "go for the gold."

Begin at the Beginning: Have a Plan

- **Start with strategy.** Successful communications are backed by strategy. Great communicators first ask themselves, "What am I trying to achieve?" Once you have a goal in mind, create some specific, measurable objectives to achieve it. Your strategy and tactics should be designed to meet these objectives.
- **Identify your target audience(s).** Audiences may be both internal to your association membership and external (e.g., key influencers of your members).
- **Match the appropriate communication vehicle and channel to each audience.** Ensure that the way you reach each target audience fits best with the way they like to receive information (e.g., email, print newsletter, print magazine, eZine, Web site). This is especially important when considering emerging technologies.

Content is King, But Don't Forget Presentation

- **Tailor your messages to each audience.** One-size-fits-all messaging is not very effective. Relate your messages more specifically to the interests and needs of each audience. Messages may vary from audience to audience as a result.
- **Tell a story.** Use anecdotes or tell a story when appropriate to make content memorable. Overall, content should be engaging, appropriate and broken into concise, digestible bites. Aim to make no more than five key points, since that is the limit for what most people can remember.
- **Sometimes good things come in small packages.** Shorter, simpler messages and content may be more effective. Longer articles or sections of copy may be appropriate for some programs, but not for others. Match the appropriate length of copy with the intended message, communication vehicle and audience (e.g., if intended as an at-a-glance summary, copy should be short and to the point, with links to online resources if the recipient wants more information).



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- **Appeal to the eye.** Effective communicators pay attention to the presentation of the information as well as the messages and content. Keep your audiences interested with visually appealing designs in your communications. Incorporate graphics, artwork or photography along with text – balance the presentation of the information with the other design elements to avoid less appealing, solid areas of text.
- **Design doesn't have to break the budget.** Good design doesn't have to be expensive, but associations should buy the best they can afford. For example, pay attention to quality and weight of paper for printed items – buy the highest quality you can afford with your budget.
- **Get the message across with multiple touchpoints.** For many people, it takes seeing/reading/hearing a message 7-8 times on average before it makes a real impression. This means sometimes you may need to include your message in more than one communications vehicle for the target audience. Try to leverage all the touchpoints available to you to get your messages out (e.g., e-mail, association Web site, eNewsletter, annual report, magazine, journal), tailoring the messages so that it is appropriate for each vehicle used.

Measure, Measure, Measure!

- **Metrics are important.** Measurement is the key to evaluating the effectiveness of your communications. Develop metrics to measure effectiveness and appeal to your audiences (e.g., number of Web hits, read rates, viral forwarding, emails and calls generated).
- **Feedback, please.** Ask your audiences for feedback on your communications – there is always room for improvement. Consider using written or online surveys to evaluate. Use the results of your measurement activities to enhance your communications and respond to audience needs.
- **Success?** Bring it full circle by comparing the results to your stated objectives. Share your successes (and lessons learned) with your colleagues and leadership.

A Few Words About Technology

- **Technology for technology's sake doesn't provide much value.** Evolving technology will always be with us, but that doesn't mean it should be used without a unique strategy customized to the specific tool being used.
- **Engage, interact, measure.** Existing and emerging technologies are designed to be used not only to improve your ability to reach audiences, but to engage and interact with them. Today's technology enables two-way conversation, but not if used in exactly the same manner as print vehicles. These same technologies can also help you measure the effectiveness of your communications so take advantage of the wide range of options.



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- **Harness the full power of digital communications.** If you plan to use digital communications as part of your overall mix, be sure to fully leverage its power. Digital communications go beyond simply using page-turning software – embed hyperlinks, video clips and audio files; link to the association Web site and related content; direct members to online communities and collaborative workspaces; include email reply-to addresses – create an interactive experience instead of a static document.
- **Don't forget the fundamentals.** Regardless of the technology format or vehicle used, the message, writing style, writing quality and design still need to be relevant and high-quality! Use strategies to both “push” condensed information to audiences and to “pull” audiences back to the association Web site or other association-sponsored micro-sites. Provide your audience with options for gathering additional information or connecting with others. Consider also how you integrate new technology with traditional communication methods.

The tools of communication may change, but the goal remains the same: getting information to the intended audiences and motivating them to engage with your association.