



Stand Out in the Crowd: Marketing at the Annual Meeting **ASSOCIATIONS NOW, January 2009**

You may think your annual meeting is the best time to roll out your new blog, research study, initiative, or whatever else. And it just may be, if you go in with a well-developed marketing strategy and a plan to wow your members.

By: Kim Fernandez

Why launching a new program, service, initiative—anything—at an annual meeting requires more than PowerPoint and confetti.

When the Texas Association of Realtors wanted to introduce its members to its new downloadable podcasts a few years ago, launching the service at its annual meeting seemed like a no-brainer. After all, 1,600 to 2,000 of its most active members would be in attendance. What better time for an in-person introduction to the exciting new offering?

The association, in fact, regularly launches new products and services at its annual meeting. "We see it as a good time to get the word out to our most active and high-ranking members," says John Gormley, vice president of communications and marketing. "It's an opportunity to create a buzz that our regional leaders can take back home and spread the word."

That launch was a success, Gormley says. With several opportunities for members to learn how to download and listen to the podcasts and association leaders using provided talking points and portable audio players to re-introduce the concept during a number of sessions and meetings, most attendees went home excited to start using the new service and tell their colleagues about it.

There are good reasons many associations use their annual conferences to introduce and market new offerings, from website and publication redesigns to new books and member benefits. And those reasons are certainly valid: The annual meeting is just about the only time mass groups of members are together with staff and volunteer leaders, and in-person launches seem more effective than those done by email, regular mail, or telephone.

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But not everyone is convinced that organizations' marketing campaigns belong at annual meetings, at least in their traditional form. Marketing experts say that not only

are attendees likely overloaded with information and distracted, but there may not be enough heavy hitters in attendance to make a conference launch really successful—and those who stayed home may feel put off because they were left out of that initial buzz.

That's not to say that a group should never use their meeting to launch something big. On the contrary, it can be a very successful way to introduce members to something new and reinforce the value of membership for those in attendance. Experts say, though, that there are many factors to consider when planning a meeting marketing blitz and many steps to take before, during, and after the big announcement to ensure that the message isn't lost by the time people get home.

Careful planning and execution, they say, is key to launching any new product or service—annual meeting or not.

The Big Launch

[Aaron Wolowiec](#), event planner for the Health Care Association of Michigan, says that no one anticipated that a new association award would take on a life of its own when it was launched at last year's annual meeting, but that's exactly what happened.

"In January 2007, we sent out invitations for our members to propose ideas for the theme for our annual event," he says. As usual, staff received a handful of ideas back and got together to flesh those out and choose one that could be carried throughout the whole conference.

One of the goals for the event was to recognize some of the group's members as being particularly outstanding in their field and providing above-and-beyond healthcare services to patients. With that in mind, the staff settled on a theme of superheroes and designed artwork for registration materials and the association's publications that featured that theme.

"We were trying to draw people in and tell them that they epitomized the everyday hero for the work they do, which is working with seniors in nursing homes and rehab facilities," Wolowiec says. "We wanted to honor and recognize them for the work they did. In turn, that turned into a convention committee meeting that decided to call on our members to nominate people who fit that role—outstanding individuals who give of themselves in caring for this older population."

Expecting a trickle of nominations, staff sent out the call. The response wasn't exactly a trickle, though.

"We received a total outpouring of nominations," says Wolowiec. They did choose two members for special recognition at the meeting, but he says it was too heartbreaking to just dispose of all of the other nominations.

Instead, two things happened. First, the other nominees were featured on the group's website, its magazine, and conference registration materials. Second, they designed lapel pins with an "S" emblem and handed those out to award nominees as they arrived at the annual meeting, with instructions to pass them on to other people they felt were superheroes in their profession.

"That simple thing snowballed into this grand event," Wolowiec says. Vendors dressed up as superhero characters, the pins became a badge of honor, and nominations for people to feature in publications continue to flow into the office more than a year later. "It ended up being this outpouring, where the theme and the idea and the spirit was infused into everything we did, from January to the rest of the year and even to now. People continue to be excited about this." The award and surrounding excitement also served to boost morale among members, he says, making them proud of themselves and their association affiliations.

He says he doubts the superhero award would have caught on nearly as well without being launched at the conference. The in-person nature of handing the pins to others, he says, was instrumental in whipping up excitement for the awards.

Marketing experts say he's probably right. "Exhibitors do it all the time," says Tony Rossell, senior vice president, Marketing General Incorporated, of launching at a conference. "Look at Steve Jobs and the Consumer Electronics show—that's where he shows us his new laptop or whatever. It's probably where you'll see your biggest customers and your most important users."

That said, he warns that associations that plan to launch products only using their conference as a platform will likely be disappointed by the results, even if the show is well-attended.

"If you're expecting to announce something at your annual meeting and have that be your only marketing effort, you're wasting your time and energy," he says.

Gormley, with the Texas Realtors, agrees. "We always do some marketing leading up to the convention," he says of their meeting launches. "We treat it like a mini-campaign and never limit a launch to just the meeting. We roll out beyond the convention."

Why Not to Launch

Others agree. "There is so much going on during a meeting and so much hoopla that it is pretty easy for your message to get lost," says Mark Stevens, CEO of marketing firm Mark Stevens & Co. and author of *Your Marketing Sucks*. "There's so much crammed into a day or two."

"People's minds are stuffed with all of this new information and all of these new people they've met," he continues. "It's a moment of being in a place where there is excitement

and there's all of this heightened interest. There's so much coming into our minds that, by normal reflexes and normal behavior, we have to let some of it go."

Besides that, he says, meeting launches often don't reach the real decision makers in an industry. That's for one simple reason: Company CEOs and other executives are frequently too busy to attend association meetings and delegate them to less senior employees, who may or may not bring the message back to the office when the meeting's over.

"The company often designates people to go who have time to go, as opposed to the heavy-hitters who have decision-making authority," he says. "You may not be reaching your real target audience. And that's why an annual meeting can be a time to use the concentrated representation of the members to reinforce something or tease a message instead."

[Kevin Whorton](#), principal of Whorton Marketing & Research, has a similar philosophy, saying that while meetings are often crowded with active members, that's not necessarily a good thing when it comes to getting a message out.

"The thing about meetings is that you generally go home with one more suitcase than you left with," he says. "If you worked the floor, you go home with lots of packets of information. You heard somebody mention this new service, so you diligently picked up the literature. Whatever those venues are, you're getting really swamped. It's like Bambi vs. Godzilla in terms of getting your message out there when there are so many others doing the same thing on the floor."

Besides that, he says, the crowds and packed schedules of most meetings mean that while it's a great time to talk with members from a staff perspective, it might not be the best time for them to listen to you.

"In terms of good merchandising, that's a time when members and attendees are concerned with their own development and business relationships. I'm not sure they're at their most receptive when it comes to hearing about association services," says Whorton.

That's why he says meetings are a great time to float ideas or start to get the word out, but not to stage an all-out launch.

"We come back as staff from these meetings and we feel sort of exhausted but really good about the conversations we've had with people," he says. "And we might have talked with 100 people, which is a small percentage of attendees. We need to recognize that more often than not, those are opportunities to get feedback, pilot, and test market, but not do a full rollout unless the objective really is onsite sales. If you're releasing something at the bookstore, for example, that's a good opportunity for people to feel and touch it at their leisure. That's a situation when you can feel good about 100 people seeing the release."

Strategy

Experts say that onsite meeting launches can be successful parts of larger marketing strategies for new products and services. The trick is to see them as just that—one part of a larger campaign—and not the be-all and end-all.

"Every group has its unofficial leaders, the people everyone looks to," says Stevens. "You need those people to be your first users, and then you get them to talk about it—send out an email to members saying they tried it, they loved it, and they're deploying it. Some people will ask if it's fair to give some members a jump start on new products and services, but it really has to do with effective marketing. They're your most powerful voice. They're the people everyone else turns to. If they buy in, the membership will buy in."

Stevens says he recently worked with an insurance association that launched a new product, and the first step was for association representatives to go on the road and show it, in person, to those influential members.

"We showed it to them privately and asked them to try it," he says. "When it came to the annual meeting, those people were asked to come on stage and give the testimonials: 'We tried this, this is not another headquarters product-of-the-month, we tried it and the difference is extraordinary.' When the unofficial leaders of the organization have used it and had success with it, they're talking for you as opposed to you selling."

He says it's also important to give people a heads-up that they're going to see something new at the meeting and generate some excitement ahead of time, both to boost attendance and to give decision makers the opportunity to delegate their time at the meeting to see the new product. But the group has to do this in a memorable way, and in a way that generates some excitement.

The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials International learned that a few years ago when they launched their new website during a business meeting at their annual conference.

"We had someone present the website and go through it click by click to show people where information was that they might have been looking for," says [Courtney McCarron](#), manager, marketing and communications/publications. She says attendees who saw the presentation found it helpful. The problem was, not many people were there to see it.

"If we had it to do over, we would find a different venue for it," she says now, adding that the demonstration was time-consuming and that attendance was disappointing. "We had a few hundred people at the meeting, even though we thought it might be the best place at the event. We wanted to have our most involved members there to not only feel they had buy-in in the process, but give us instantaneous feedback on what they were

thinking. In hindsight, we might have been better off creating a resource room where people could come in on their own time."

Last year, the group launched a new series of public service announcements, but at a designated booth on the show floor instead of during a meeting with a single presentation. "We had our own booth on the floor with a nice flatscreen running the PSAs and people there to discuss them and get names and contact information of people who might want to use them," she says. "It absolutely was more successful."

Stevens says creating a buzz around an upcoming launch is critical if it's to happen in a meeting, as this one did.

"We recently started a launch by sending a little black leather-type box to our members," he says. "The box said, 'This is the most powerful box in the world.' Inside was a silver plate with a URL on it. People went there and saw a new service that was extraordinary—we didn't show them the whole thing but teased them with it. Then, at the show, they saw the fully-baked URL with a video about what we were launching, and there was a person to tell them about it. After, we sent everyone something home—not a squeegee ball, not a brochure, but something like the box—something they'd remember. And we didn't send it home in a packet, but FedEx'd it to them at home. It's a dramatic new way to sell, and it's something they remember."

That, he says, is key to show or meeting launches: Remember that people are overloaded and wow them, and then remind them later of that wow factor.

"You can't put it in a Powerpoint presentation and send them home with a brochure," he says. "Think of something like the Segway—a dramatic new way to sell it. It takes thought, no question. Conventional wisdom is easy. You need to go beyond that."

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