



e-ssociating:

The 21st Century Art of Electronic Association Marketing

By Michael Faye

Do you know what year the term “global village” first appeared? 2002? 1998? How about 1962, from none other than that most prescient of media luminaries, Marshall McLuhan. He saw that rather than divide us or enslave us, our “electronic interdependence” would free us to connect in new and ever-expanding ways.



M cLuhan could envision that more than 40 years ago — so why do many associations still struggle to put together the big picture of all that “e-ssociating” can accomplish? In our experience as a marketing agency specializing in associations, it’s not lack of vision — more likely, it’s lack of time or staff, or simply that glazing over, which happens to people in all sectors when attempting to keep up with the frighteningly rapid pace of technological change.

Three Powerful Benefits of E-ssociating

There are three critical and very traditional reasons why every association needs to develop its own style of electronic life: recruitment, retention and, perhaps most importantly, revitalization of its membership and mission. To help you start putting together your big picture, this article will introduce three common, but not commonly understood, elements of social media: blogs, wikis and e-mail marketing.

Blogs: Give Your Membership a Voice (and Listen Closely)

Blogs are fundamentally content management systems that make it easy to post articles and then receive feedback. Blogs have been around for only a few years, and seem to be gaining increasing popularity among associations as they empower you to post articles and then immediately receive measurable input from members. This gives your membership a voice and a platform which, if used correctly, can serve to improve retention, strengthening community and loyalty.

It all centers on creating value. By better knowing your members you can better tailor content around topics that interest them. Luckily, if you are unsure what topics your members value the most, the tools included with a blog can help you measure that, too. An analytics plug-in can show you which pages and articles are the most visited, and the number of comments per article can provide valuable direction. The knowledge gained through these measured results can then be applied throughout your entire organization, helping guide and structure other marketing efforts.

Wikis: The Collaboration Nation

Suppose you’re thinking about posting articles and resources, and you would like your members to have the ability to contribute and edit content. This is where wikis come in. Wikis are a system made famous by Wikipedia.org, easily allowing collaboration among many users online.

In the association world, a wiki can serve a number of uses. Imagine your organization is planning its annual conference. You place information regarding possible topics for break-out discussions within your wiki. Some of your members then update the information to include alternate topics, key speakers or other valuable insights. This document can continually evolve and serve as a reason to revisit your site for updates. Other uses may include creating a knowledge bank of articles that serve as a resource for newer members, or perhaps summarizing presentations from previous conventions and seminars. By offering these items to your members, you are able to take information that they may have otherwise missed or forgotten and leverage it as a key benefit.

E-mail Marketing: Mass Appeal

E-mail marketing has been around about as long as e-mail itself, and has likely been attempted by your organization. While many associations avoid this means of communication for fear of being labeled spammers, e-mail is the technology that most members have been using the longest and with which they have the most familiarity. Consequently, e-mail marketing could be your most successful electronic outreach.

With today's advanced e-mail delivery systems you can get exact information regarding who read the e-mail, how many people deleted it and even what links within the message they clicked. All of this information is extremely valuable and can be used to determine what topics are most popular with your members. E-mail can also serve as a promotional tool for blogs and wikis. By sending out an e-mail every quarter detailing the most popular items on your blog and wiki, you can keep your members involved in the organization's on-going "conversation."

Integrated Programs: The Multiplier Effect

These technologies ultimately create the most impact when they are implemented together. Returning to the example of an annual convention, imagine that for the months leading up to the convention you post relevant articles in your association's blog about the topics that are going to be discussed. The convention takes place, and you then send an HTML e-mail to your members informing them that you have placed summaries of all the presentations in your wiki, and inviting them to provide feedback. They also can continue interacting with the informa-



tion and each other via the blog and wiki, extending the convention's impact long past its closing date.

In this scenario, each medium is used to enhance the others while providing value and interest to the membership every step of the way.

"Gilt" by E-ssociation: You're Golden with this kind of ROI

Associations typically take a very reactive approach to their marketing efforts. "Our recruitment numbers are sharply down or our convention attendance has been dropping off. Why?" Capital is then invested on direct mail or advertising to counter the slumping numbers.

By implementing these new technologies, your organization can be far more proactive in your marketing efforts. Your members will have a voice and be heard, which will shape the messages that your organization puts out. Your organization will be much more relevant to its members because they have a real-time forum to discuss current issues and hot topics. These new technologies can give your organization measurable results, highly targeted messaging and far better ROI.

The above barely touches the surface of what associations of every size can achieve with e-ssociating. Through the creation of a well thought-out marketing plan that incorporates both traditional and electronic marketing initiatives, recruiting, retaining and revitalizing your membership can be more effective and cost-efficient than ever thought. ■

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