

*A guide for associations
with a small staff*

5 Strategies That Will Transform your {Small Non-profit} Communications Department

TAGb Consulting



Small or large, an association's aim is to serve its members, as their engagement impacts on its ability to thrive. Successful retention does not happen by chance. It requires understanding what members want, and then delivering it in a format they prefer.

Small staff associations are defined as having a budget of less than 2 million dollars, with a staff of less than 10 people. Due to its size, and access to resources, the small staff association needs to ensure that day-to-day tasks do not overwhelm, and drown out the more crucial goals of engagement and retention. To reach that balance, your small staff association needs to be strategic about how and when to use its resources.

To that end, this report outlines 5 strategies that your association can use to transform its communications department.

Strategy #1

Respect your communications department!

One of the small staff association's greatest problems is how and when to communicate with its members. The challenge is how to create messages that make an impact, and how to deliver those messages in such a way that inspires action from prospects, members and the community at large.

In most small staff associations, not enough priority is placed on maintaining an effective communications department. Too often, the role is either managed by just one person, ignored, or even, part of the Executive Director's role!

A well-run communications department can help your association retain members by identifying:

- Who your members are, their needs and interests
- What messages to deliver and when
- How to raise your association's profile with content designed to promote and establish its reputation

None of these tasks can be managed by a communications department that is uncommitted or out of focus. Associations need to ensure that their communications departments are given the resources to achieve these goals.

Strategy #2

Know who your members are and why they joined your association

Sheri Jacobs points out that often associations fret when members don't register for courses, go to events, or even, sign up for the newsletter. In her book, *The Art of Membership*, she points out that members join for different reasons. Some might be content with just receiving the newsletter, while others want the entire membership package, and even volunteer.

The point is: associations cannot pigeonhole members, or make assumptions. Constant research forms the basis of an effective communications strategy, and is necessary to ensure that you are in tune with members' needs. Start by asking new members why they joined your association, and continue interacting with them as they go through various membership stages. Knowing what they want is crucial to keeping them as members.

Strategy #3: Be smart about technology

For a small staff association, choosing the right tools is essential to great communication. The right tool saves time, helps with creative planning, and with smart usage, can put the small association on the same level as larger associations.

Here's how to get the most out of your technology:

Integrate

Ensure your technology can talk to each other. Starting with a membership database, data you collect must be usable throughout your association.

Segment

Your members are not all at the same stage in their careers, nor do they think alike. But there are segments which share similar characteristics. Targeting your communications to members who share such characteristics, leads to more relevant information, and higher levels of engagement.

Personalize

Use technology to humanize your association. Most members will never visit your office or see your staff. This disconnect can often lead to frustration and a perception that their needs are not being met.

Technology allows you to be more personal when you send out messages, or even when you address a brochure. The more personal you get in your communications, the more your association becomes attuned to the specific needs of your members. You are then, aligning your member's interests with the information they require.

Automate

Use technology to set up your processes once and then check occasionally. This removes human error and saves time on repetitive tasks.

Communications and operating plans become strategic instead of hit and miss. Automation requires planning ahead, which ensures that your association has to have all its pieces in place for the year to come.

In addition, automation allows you to be more relevant by communicating just at the point of your members' needs.

Smart examples

Use email marketing software to:

- Send welcome emails to members who just join. Automated welcome emails receive higher clicks because they are sent when members are most interested in hearing from you.
- Set up event campaigns to encourage members to attend your events.
- Send emails to members during dues renewals time.
- Post updates directly on social media the same time an email is sent out.
- Include personal details within email messages such as name, title, and when the member joined your association.
- Distribute personalized electronic newsletters.
- Create specific campaigns based on member profiles and behaviors.
- Track responses to specific campaigns.

Use membership software to:

- Record member profiles – age, education, career level, and relevant demographics.
- Record what sessions a member attended at a past conference, and then suggest similar sessions for the future.
- Manage members' activities within your association, whether by pages visited on your website, or emails they prefer to receive.

Website

- Think Amazon.com. Personalization allows you to select and display only resources geared to the member's individual needs, based on their activities within your association.
- Choose which parts of your website your member can access and deny them access to irrelevant sections.

Print

- Use variable printing to create distinct pieces for each segment of your membership.



Strategy #4

Use the right tools

For a small staff association, the following technology is critical:

Membership database

More powerful than Excel – collecting data on your members provides insight into who your members are.

Email marketing software

It's quick, efficient and even trackable. Email connected with a database enables your association to send out communications easily, at a lower cost than print, and even track what members are paying attention to or not.

Free software/in the cloud software

If cost and training is a consideration for your association, consider using web based/in the cloud software. These software are often scaled-down versions of bigger brands, and provide basic features which are what most consumers often use.

For instance, if you only use Photoshop to crop or brighten photos, you don't need a full scale program. In the cloud software provides you with the features you need, without the commitment of buying the more expensive full scale versions.

Examples

Canva for Quark or InDesign

JoinMe for GoTo Meeting

Pixlr for Photoshop

Wordpress for any content management system

Strategy #5

Pay attention to demographics

The way people access communications varies depending on their age. Age determines comfort level, convenience and the sense of value an association provides.

No longer can an association provide just one or two forms of communication – you have to think further to accommodate the needs of several segments.

In addition, this includes the method in which content is written, how you provide access to said content, and even, how the pieces are designed.

To serve all members, an average association holding a conference now needs to provide the following communications:

- Conference program in online, app and print formats
- Registration online, paper and onsite registration
- Updates on social media
- Livestreamed sessions via website
- Maps and schedules, both in print and via app or online

Associations that choose to ignore one demographics' needs in favour of another's run the risk of complaints, and then, lack of renewals.

The key is to cover the needs of all members.

What's the next step?

These strategies are a good starting point, but implementing them requires time and commitment from all parties – Board, Executive, volunteers and staff.

That's where your communications professional comes in. You need an expert in building consensus, negotiation, research, and managing the expectations of different stakeholders.

Due to its essential role, sometimes your communications department needs help. And that's where TAGb Consulting comes in. We show associations how to improve their communications by applying digital tools and techniques.

Our aim is to reduce your workload, clear your backload and allow your association to focus on its goals of retention, non-dues revenue and increased attendance at its conferences, seminars and meetings.

Visit TAGb.ca for more information.



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