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MARKETING • PUBLISHING CONSULTING

10 Things You Can Do *Today* to Boost The Effectiveness of Your Marketing Program

It is human nature to try and improve upon the conditions around us, and as humans we are hardwired to be curious and to strive to improve our lot in life in ways large and small. For organizations, there have been many theories expounded over the years about quality improvement, continuous improvement, conscious improvement and a slew of others – clearly getting better at what you do as an organization is a key component to success.

If you think of your outreach marketing program as the volume control for the information reaching prospective members or customers, it would be a simple impulse to turn up that switch when you needed more members, or wanted to launch a new program – improving your communication quality, focusing the message, boosting the frequency and breadth of the media carrying it to increase sales or membership in one simple motion.

Unfortunately it's not really that simple. However, there are lots of small things you can do to increase the effectiveness of your outreach marketing - some of them as easy and inexpensive as turning up that volume control. Some may seem obvious, but in aggregate, they should boost response, increase participation, build membership and loyalty, and increase retention in your organization.

1) Get To Know Your Audience

Primary research among membership-based organizations is more rare than most would care to admit, and good research into your members' preferences, needs and desires can really provide you with a good, solid foundation for basing creative and strategic decisions going forward. The more you know about your members and prospective members, the more your marketing messages will resonate, the more likely your offers will be found relevant to their lives, and the more value they will find in the programs designed for their benefit. Phone research, in the form of in-depth interviews with members, either individuals or representatives of organizations, can provide eye-opening insights that can drive your strategic marketing efforts in a new and more effective direction. There are several highly reputable research organizations and consultants that can help guide you through the process to be sure you get accurate, actionable results.

TO DO: From your in-house database, select 20 members, and 20 prospects, with a good selection of large and small (trade only), or for professional societies, a good mix of member types. Call the list using a short 1-page, 5-question script devised to elicit in-depth responses, not one word answers. Use questions that rank priorities as often as feasible, so you have some quantitative data as well as general, anecdotal information. Note the differences between members and prospects – that gap is where to focus your efforts.

2) Refine and Use Your "House" List for Direct Mail

Your member database is the heart of your organization. Is it healthy? Is there plaque build-up of bad information, outdated addresses, prospects that have no relevance to your offers, or need of your services? Is it unwieldy to use, complex to navigate, cumbersome to work with? Is it structured the way your organization works so that it mirrors your efforts, or does it fight you every step of the way? Do you find that it takes an inordinate amount of time and effort to extract what should be simple requests for subsets or quick lists like committees or sub-groups? If the answer is "Yes" to any of these questions, it's time to evaluate your database software, structure and use in light of how your organization uses and needs access to data.

If you can't easily extract and manipulate your own in-house data, it will be extremely difficult to compare it to prospect data so you can make intelligent selections for focused, targeted, personalized mailings. Bad data does more damage than good data used ineffectively, especially in membership-based organizations where every member needs to be treated like gold, let alone executive committees, board members, special-interest groups that need some extra attention.

TO DO: Select a random list of 40 members from your database, however your normal procedures allow you to do that. If it takes longer than about an hour, you need to develop new processes at a minimum, and at worst you need to revamp your entire database, starting with new software and converting the data, after you clean it up and verify each piece. One quick way to do this is with a database dump postcard. Craft a postcard that explains what you're trying to do – clean your data. Ask the members to update the info on the label on the front in spaces on the back if need be and mail it back to you. The first 200 that return the card will receive a small gift as a "Thank You". You should receive less than 2% bad addresses. If not, time to do a major overhaul of your data.

3) Re-Evaluate Your Benefits and Offers – Are They Still Relevant?

The question running through any prospect's mind when they think about membership is "What's in it for me?" If the benefits of membership are not delineated in crystal clear fashion in your prospecting and membership materials, you've lost before it ever gets opened. Presenting a compelling reason to join and stay a member has everything to do with knowing the audience and crafting benefits statements that resonate with that audience. They should be strongly worded, clearly written and explained, and demonstrated as a benefit that solves a known and widely understood "problem" within the homogenous group.

If you're the Paint and Stain Manufacturers Association, and your biggest issue of concern for members is EPA regulatory compliance, one of your benefits should be something like "Close monitoring and strong, regular member input on all regulatory and legislative issues that could negatively impact manufacturers of all types of paints and stains." While that activity ultimately benefits non-members as well, the key is "*member input*" – they get direct access to legislators, through correspondence and website access, etc. Direct benefit - strong statement.

TO DO: Using the data gathered in item Number One, trot out your membership selling brochure and verify that the benefits of membership there still match up with the recently gathered data surrounding member needs and desires. If they don't, it might be time to re-evaluate the use of that piece of collateral.

4) Review Your Media List – And Use It To Raise Your Profile

Trade media should be the marketer's best friend. Good relationships with publishers and editors of various magazines, newsletters, websites, and blogs that serve your industry, including your own publications, is essential to crafting a cohesive view of your organization and branding the organization accurately and effectively. Strong relationships with those key individuals allow you to:

- Craft and release your statements at leisure
- Gives you early warning of other's perceptions of the organization from a neutral source
- Can tip you off to impending PR crisis
- Gives you heads up when there are going to be controversial stories written that involve your organization
- Allows them to readily contact you to get your point of view before it's published

. . . in short, it keeps the media fair and reasonable, and allows you better access to your audience, which consists of both members and prospects.

TO DO: Review your media list, and call the Managing Editor, and the Publisher, of the top 10 publications, websites or blogs covering your industry. Ask some simple questions about how your organization is performing based on what they've heard from their advertisers and readers. Let them know that you've got some exciting new initiatives coming in the near future and you'd like to get their take on them before you launch them, since you value their opinion so highly. Not only will this reconnect you to them with the call itself, but give them something to gossip about and talk to the others about, speculating about your next move. Suddenly, you may notice that your next press release will get a lot more attention than it might have otherwise.

5) Show How Exciting Your Meeting Is, Not How Great The City Is

Meetings as a function have changed and evolved significantly, especially in the last few years, as travel has been curtailed for budgetary and security reasons. Your meeting marketing must show compelling reasons for your members to:

- work their way out of the office for a few days
- go through the trauma that is today's airport security
- get set up for three days of meeting, greeting and eating
- reverse the travel home,
- foot the entire bill themselves for the airfare, hotel, meals, seminars and the rest.

That needs to be some pretty convincing marketing. The meeting must look like they'll be at a grave disadvantage if they miss it, by presenting unequivocal benefits for attendees, tangible benefits that you can clearly see the advantage in receiving. That fact that it's in Cleveland, or Orlando, or Seattle, or wherever, is of minimal

benefit, unless you live near the convention hotel in those cities. For the other 90+ percent of your members, it poses no compelling reason to attend. As hotels become more homogenous and hotel brands are imposed more rigidly on individual locations and select properties, there is even less to differentiate the location for the meeting attendee – when one looks much like another, there's not even any benefit to the hotel choice, let alone city destination. At the end of the day, attendees will have seen a ball room or two, a generic restaurant, possibly the parking garage and their generic room. If not their hometown, it may as well be anywhere – unless you make it a special, memorable experience. Make your meeting memorable with solid content, outstanding speakers that really know your industry and are exciting to listen to, and after hours activities that really showcase the destination, its history and culture. Focusing on the destination in your marketing materials is a crutch, is not effective, and can easily be avoided with some creativity, some teamwork with your meetings department and committee interaction in the planning stages.
TO DO: Pull out the collateral and registration materials used to promote the last five meetings you hosted for members – examine them under the cold light of day, and see if you used any of the destination crutches to create "excitement". Examine the program as a hard-working, time-starved, cash-strapped member might, and see if you'd attend this meeting if it were up to you to pay for it. Show them to your neighbor, and ask them "if the meeting were intended for their industry, would they pay to attend?" If not, time to re-examine your meetings goals and the approach you use to market them.

6) Benefits, Benefits, Benefits!

"What's in it for me" is the phrase that you can use to evaluate all your activities geared toward communicating with members and prospects. Meeting promotions, membership promotions, ancillary sales of products, insurance promotions, publication sales, sponsorship sales, and more can all benefit from this exercise. If it's not clear what the member gets in return for their participation, in cold hard prose, then write the piece so it is clear. There isn't much time to get the point across, as people's attention spans shorten and they get bombarded with messages in the thousands each day. If they have to work to understand your value proposition for their business, their career or their personal development, you've lost them before you start. If you begin with the mindset that recipients read to find something in it for them, you'll be highlighting benefits rather than outlining features, a great start to creating a persuasive, effective outreach piece. Your organization offers great benefits to its members, or it wouldn't exist – you just have to dig them out, rephrase them and present them in a meaningful way that will resonate with the audience. Tighten the copy to focus on benefits – it forces you to crystallize the value proposition and is extremely persuasive.
TO DO: Dig out the last broad membership promotion you created, and see if you can extract 5 tangible, relevant benefits – not "it's good for you and your industry", but real "you'll be (smarter, richer, faster, better prepared) once you join" benefits. If you can't find five, it's time to rework your outreach recruitment efforts to focus on the needs of your audience.

7) Crank Up the Creativity – Reach Out in a New Way

Promotions, especially direct mail collateral pieces, are most effective when they take the recipient by surprise. Intrigue the reader, present them with something quirky, unexpected, outside the norm – in other words "Get Creative!" Because of the cyclic nature of most non-profit marketing, the temptation is to update materials or recycle concepts from prior years. This can save you some time in the mechanical portion – crafting the order form, hotel information, directions other common elements to prevent you from re-inventing the wheel. But it can be deadly to take a previously used piece of creative materials and simply change the dates and the city. Don't fall into that trap. The only way to cut through the message clutter your audience experiences every day is to catch their attention with something with a very high "Wow" factor. Change formats, use an unusual paper stock, bring out the bright colors, if you normally use type, try an original illustration, if you've used illustration, try photography.

The new concept behind the execution is even more critical. Stick out of the mailbox with a dimensional mailing of unusual proportion or odd shape. Try a contest, a multi-part mailing, a premium, bundle several offers into one themed piece. If you've done it before, eject it from the start and see what you can come up with that still resonates with the audience. Mail still pulls response beautifully if executed well, and something truly new and exciting is still extremely effective. It's hard to deliver a sample of a product with an e-mail! Use the advantage that mail offers you and get personal with the audience. With today's digital production techniques, there's no reason that each collateral piece can't be virtually unique to the recipient – that alone makes it different and engaging. The trick is to get the audience's attention – if it doesn't get opened they can't read it, and if it doesn't get read, they can't act upon your offer.

TO DO: Try this exercise – Gather your creative staff around a flip chart. The goal is to create an ad for your next meeting to run in your house member publication in an hour. Get your staff together and brainstorm 5 concepts, each extending the original concept one degree further out than the last. Start with headlines, images, copy points, whatever drives the execution forward most efficiently for you. The only rule is, you can't have used the idea before anywhere in the organization previously. By the time you get to the fifth concept, you should be breaking some new ground.

8) Deliver The Message In a Way They'd Like To Receive It

Someone famous said "The medium is the message" – never has that been more true than now, in the age of multi-media, electronic, digital, satellite, cell phone, PDA, blackberry, text message driven society. A good message sent via the wrong medium will almost certainly fall on deaf ears and blind eyes. On the other hand, a good match of medium and message can multiply the impact.

The good news is, after doing your research from Number 1, and updating your database from Number 2, and created groundbreaking creative from Number 7, you can deliver this new marketing communications miracle in the way that the recipient would like to receive it, simply by asking them. Give your members and even prospects a choice as to how they would like to hear from you. Getting their permission has some wide ranging benefits for both you and the recipient.

For you, permission-based delivery:

- Makes your job of reaching them easier
- Makes the task of delivery more efficient and effective
- Cements your relationship to the recipient
- Improves the chance that the recipient will take action
- Broadens your potential audience through the use of alternative media

For the recipient, it

- Delivers the message where, when and how they want to see it
- Give them the freedom of choice
- Gives them control of their relationship with you
- Lets them respond in a way that is easy for them on their schedule

All these benefits can be yours for the taking, if you just ask for the information. Some of this type of permission-based activity, unfortunately, has been legislated for us, in the form of CANSPAM regulations related to spam e-mail and FCC junk fax regulations, which require that there be a prior relationship with the recipient, that you keep the permission form on file, require that there be an actual address and phone number, that there be a mechanism for opting out of receiving future messages and mandating the use of the advertisement notification as part of commercial e-mail messages.

How do you get this information, and how do you keep it all straight? The answer is in the structure of your recipient database. If you've noted that a certain subset of your house list seems to respond well to e-mail rather than mail, be sure that this group receives the promotion via e-mail almost exclusively – save the postage. If you've noted that a fax to a certain group, or about a certain issue seems to pull well, flag them for faxing as a matter of routine – save the postage and printing. If you've noticed that a certain type of offer works best only when mailed, create a whole series of mailers on that topic and mail away. The trick is to reach people in a way that works for THEM.

TO DO: Gather up the registration cards, order blanks, response coupons, and other ordering devices you routinely use throughout the years to prompt and record an order. Lay them out and review each, and see if there's room for a simple multiple choice question: "How would you like to receive information about this (organization, product, activity, issue)? Mail, Fax, E-mail, Phone, text message, other." Armed with this information on your members and prospects, your response rate for all of them is bound to rise if you just use it.

9) Cross Promote Whenever Possible – Strength in Numbers

When does 1+1+1 = 5? When each of those "1"s cross-promotes to the others. Chances are your organization has several different departments, each promoting their product, program, event or benefit. Chances are also good that several of those outgoing promotions are going to the same individual, either member or prospect. If your database is so equipped, from number 2, and all the departments share that database, then you can flag them as multiples, and at least bundle them into a common envelope and save on materials and postage. If it happens a lot, you'll save a bit of money, but eventually everyone will get everything going out in one envelope, and your targeting goes out the window. If it happens occasionally, but your prospect or member list needs a bit of broadening or your meeting attendance needs a boost, cross promotion is the answer. A piece of collateral promoting the latest book might also mention that there's a newsletter on a similar topic available to members only, and it might mention that there's a seminar session at the annual meeting on that topic for top executive members only. On the other hand, seminar attendees receiving a meeting promotion could also have a book list inserted, with the relevant titles highlighted, based on the sessions they've attended in the past.

The key is to find a common thread or common denominator to help cross over the recipient to take advantage of more than one service or product you offer. Each time one piece sent to a subgroup of members or prospects mentions another service they might find appealing, it acts as a multiplier, at no cost, for the effectiveness of the program, the interactivity of the piece, and the effectiveness of the organization in accomplishing its mission of serving members. But how do you carry that out?

Once again, it's the database to the rescue. It should show you all the activity of the members, and also what each prospect has received, at least for the previous year, hopefully farther back than that. All that information is waiting to be put to use, like money in the bank. It's up to you to use it.

TO DO: Pull together a year's worth of promotions from the past year from all the various departments, and search each one for mentions of other services, products or events by other departments. Try to find 5 instances where cross promotion could be inserted in any one of them, promoting 5 related benefits, even if it's just a web address for the other product or service. If you can't find all 5, this technique could be used more regularly to boost participation and save money within your organization.

BONUS: To check your capability for increasing the use of cross promotion and determine what your savings might be, delve into your database's search capability and see if you can run a list with events or products in common by name – you might be amazed at the connections you find!

10) Leave No Stone Unturned – Use Alternative Media and Bring Big Results

Marketing an organization, especially a member-based one, is a full-time 24/7/365 effort, but that doesn't mean you have to work that long or that hard – you can let technology do some of the work for you. Used properly and appropriately, technology, including traditional phones, cell phones, PDAs, Blackberry devices and other computer based message equipment can be doing the job when you're home enjoying your own time. The goal is to be "top-of-mind" for members for the benefits you offer – you have to be the number one brand for those particular products or services so that whenever they think of those things or need those things, they think of you as the best, the quickest, the highest quality, indeed the ONLY place to get those things, and if they stop being a member, they lose all that access. In order to do that, you need to be a ubiquitous presence in their working lives. One way to do that is by using a variety of media to reach them.

Say a fax arrives in their office promoting a meeting, then several days later, a brochure with full registration information arrives in the mail. The member calls the organization for an unrelated service, and during the brief period he's on "Hold" he hears a promotion for the meeting's key note speaker, in his own voice, offering 3 tips for how to get more out of their meeting attendance. Three days before the meeting, an e-mail arrives, with links to the meeting webpage, containing a pre-populated registration form on which they simply complete the payment info and hit "submit". Two days before the meeting, the recipient's cell phone receives a text message with last minute hotel rates at the meeting hotel and a 800 number, and a local number for the local golf course to arrange for a tee time. That member has been hit with six different media, all promoting different aspects of the same meeting, with cohesive messaging, coherent branding, personalized information and they've gotten the message at different times, for different reasons, on different devices, in different environments. That kind of ubiquity can be expensive, but it can lead to stellar results for the number of dollars spent, if executed correctly. Computer technology can make this all possible, and in many cases, automatic to the point of being hands-off.
TO DO: Investigate your organization's capability to use all possible media for outgoing messages, including e-mail, pop-ups, live web links and PURLS (Personalized, Uniform Resource Locator), broadcast e-mail, broadcast Fax, broadcast text messages, on-hold recordings, automated voice mail, IP-based registration or automated orderform pages with unique log-in, and any other technology that can deliver a message. Once this inventory has been completed, see if there is a way to drive them all from your in-house database. Once the technology is hooked up and interacting, the sky's the limit for using various combinations to reach members and prospects in unique ways.

The above tips touch on many different aspects of non-profit and organizational marketing programs, but they are by no means complete or inclusive. They should at least be recognizable within your organization in some form, and will hopefully get the wheels spinning as you relate each to how you currently market the organization, and how some of them might fit into your current plan. Some are free or inexpensive to implement, other require a greater investment in time, money and energy but pay off significant dividends in the longer term in increased member participation, boosted meeting attendance, bigger member rolls, more active committees, greater visibility for your organization and increased operational efficiency going forward. Anything you can do to increase visibility, build awareness, encourage members to join, participate and stay members is worth investigating.

About the Author: David Poulos, Chief Consultant at Granite Partners, has been providing marketing guidance and expertise to clients firms large and small for over 25 years. Specialties include non-profit membership marketing, tradeshow marketing, direct mail, and full-scale strategic marketing campaigns. He can be reached via the web at www.granite-part.com, or by phone at 410-472-4570. Granite Partners is based in Sparks, Maryland and services clients nationwide.