

10 association marketing myths

by Beth Palmer



Don't allow these myths to confuse and entangle your association's marketing strategy.

ASSOCIATIONS FACE MANY CHALLENGES. The organizational make-up, not-for-profit financial structure, and member-focused vision that associations have make them unique. This often means that their problems do not fit into traditional business-to-business marketing scenarios. Because of this, many myths spring up which confuse and entangle association marketing strategies. Here are a few common ones:



Myth #1 We don't have any competition

It is irritating when you hear marketing gurus (or even worse, a marketing firm you just hired) going on and on about your competition. You don't have any competition; you are the only association for your segment of the industry. But does that really mean you have no competition? Often, associations overlook their competitors because they are not direct competitors. They only compete with one of the services the association offers, not all of the services offered.

For instance, if you offer a seminar on time management, how many other time

management seminars are being offered to your members? Are they closer to home or less expensive? This is competition. What about your publications? Is the information in your newsletter or magazine duplicated in other industry publications? Sometimes these publications are considered partners, but they are competition, too. Competition is everywhere—you just have to keep your eyes open.

Myth #2 We have all the members we can get

Market saturation does happen. But when it happens, it just means you need a new market. We all know that if we don't grow, we shrink. And, there is nothing worse than watching dwindling membership numbers. So, sitting back is not an option.

Start with these simple ideas: Is there an overlooked group of companies that fit in with your association, but was previously considered too big or too small? Can you target a profession that is a stepping stone to the profession you serve? Is a student membership available? Can memberships be offered both at the company level and the individual level? Have you really investigated all available lists of member prospects and mined every name possible? With a little digging, you may find a wealth of opportunities.

Myth #3 If the committee is satisfied with the final product, our job is done

Satisfying the desires of a committee is a difficult and all-consuming task. Many staff members spend so much time satisfying the committee, they have little time or energy to get a clear perspective of the project itself. Of course, the committee

drives the idea, but the staff has to make it work, and this is the hard part.

No committee will ever be satisfied if it finds its idea was launched but was never embraced by the membership. The idea is not enough; it is how the idea is communicated to the membership. If insufficient money or energy is allocated to market the idea, it will die...even if it is a really good idea.

Myth #4 An ad campaign is the center of a marketing plan

For large corporations, advertising is the most important tool to build awareness of a product and maintain a brand, thereby increasing sales. But how does this apply to a not-for-profit association? The answer is: It doesn't.

For most association programs, the key target audience is the membership, and almost every company, contact name, address, and e-mail address is known. This makes direct mail a highly effective tool. Most revenue generating events, like the annual meeting, are promoted principally through direct mail. Then the message is later repeated in ads (if they can be placed on a trade-out basis; free is the key). But advertising does not equal marketing. The association still has a message, products and services, a brand image, and needs to generate revenue and recruit new members. Marketing is the only way to do that. And the right marketing plan will make it happen whether or not advertising is a part of it.

Myth #5 Great creative for direct mail is not important; it's the list

In an association, hours are spent maintaining and updating lists. This includes lists of members, prospective members, attendees or exhibitors, and even lists of key people in government. Sometimes substantial dollars are spent purchasing lists to recruit members. But then what happens? Thousands of direct mail pieces are sent to the post office and never heard from again. So what's missing? The creative.

This doesn't mean splashy type and bold letters or obscure messages no one understands. Great creative means crafting the right message (see sidebar on page 23). Your message must appeal to the market, drawing your audience in before it goes in the trash. If your envelope is never opened, your message has no impact (even if it actually makes it to the desk of your best prospect).

Myth #6 Our members will think the creative is too glitzy

Good creative begins with understanding the market. Your marketing materials must show that you truly understand your members or they will feel alienated. If you think your members hate glitzy, you are probably right. But this doesn't mean that they are not attracted by the design of a piece.

Though difficult to admit, we all form instant opinions based on looks. The look

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of your piece will set the tone for the way your prospect connects with your association. If it looks unprofessional, they will assume that the programs offered are unprofessional. If the piece looks cheap, they will think what you offer is cheap. If you give no importance to the creative, your message will be fighting to overcome an ingrained prejudice we all have. It's based on "looks."

Myth #7 It's better to do everything in-house

Design all marketing pieces in-house, where you have full control over the look and content, and it costs less. It sounds like a good idea. But it may not be so good over the long run. The first issue is cost savings. If you're a small association, hiring an in-house designer is worthwhile only if the costs from your design firm surpass the cost of an employee (including insurance, raises, etc.). Many projects may have a larger upfront cost (branding, a new Web site), but the cost of long-term maintenance is much less. And there are other issues besides cost. By going in-house, you may be giving up more than you realize.

Outside perspective is valuable. Without it, creative may reflect the feelings of the staff and not the feelings of the membership. In-house designers rarely have the authority or will to maintain an association's brand identity. Each department demands and gets what they ask for, which in a very short time, can splinter the association's identity. And, of course, the creative will get stale. The designer eventually becomes narrow in his or her perspective or, worse yet, bored.

Myth #8 The Web site is the responsibility of IT, not marketing

Once upon a time, Web sites were difficult to build and maintain. Even small associations found it more cost-effective to hire an IT person to maintain the Web site. But technology continues to improve. New and innovative ways to build Web sites are being created every day. Web sites can now be constructed with built-in content management tools that make it easy for a non-technical person to update. Another factor in the evolution of Web sites is the fact that there is much greater usage today. In the past, many associations felt that few of their members were tech-savvy enough to use the Web site, so they invested little in it. But today, Web sites are the first place people go to find information. If you are curious about an organization, or if you are looking for new information, what is the first thing you do? Check out the Web site. Whether you like it or not, your members and prospects are judging your organization based on its Web site.

So who should be responsible for controlling the message, design and information on it? Not the IT department. And with a built-in content management tool, the marketing department won't even need IT's help to maintain the site.

Myth #9 The vocal minority usually expresses the feelings and opinions of the overall association membership

If one person complains, it must mean hundreds of other people feel the same way. Logical, but it's just not true. This is why suggestion boxes usually don't work. Have you ever been satisfied and filled out one of those cards? Being satisfied, by definition, does not require action.

Although most of us recognize that complainers do not represent the norm, we still allow them to dictate our marketing direction. If this goes on indefinitely, the consequences are disastrous. You end up with a marketing plan that ignores the wishes of the majority of your members—and only satisfies the vocal minority. (Note: The vocal minority could also be your board.)

Myth #10 Technology is everything/technology is nothing

The topsy-turvy nature of the economy over the last five years has left all of us reeling. One common myth for associations in the beginning of this technology roller coaster ride was: "People will stop going to trade shows because they can get the same connections online." Can they? Did people stop traveling once they could watch exotic places on TV? No. In fact, people travel now more than ever. People like people. Most of us do not want to be chained to our computers and never go anywhere. People would rather network in person if we make it fun.

Do your members view your expo or conference as a chore or opportunity? Your marketing should emphasize the experience of the conference, not just as a place to shop (which they can do online), but as a place to see, taste, touch, and meet. What effect should technology have? It gives you a chance to connect with your members on a regular, on-going basis. E-mail marketing is one of the fastest growing, most successful marketing methods used today. Just because your members didn't have e-mail two years ago, doesn't mean that they don't have it today. People that didn't have a computer two years ago are shopping for broadband today. So don't get left behind, because if you don't e-mail your members, someone else will.

Don't let mythological ideas hold you back! Marketing for associations is unique and challenging, but also rewarding. Invest the time and energy to market your products and services well, and you will reap revenue and results. □

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Marketing for the small association

by Buz Buzogany, CAE

"Small associations" are usually defined by the size of their budget not the number of members, nor the potential impact, they may have on their profession or trade. Most often a budget of less than \$2 million would qualify an association as being "small." Of course that would also qualify it as one of the majority of associations that exists today. So the following message is targeted to those folks who may not have big budgets, but have big ambitions in marketing their association, its brand or image, products/services or accomplishments.

Who are your targets?

Are you trying to attract new members? Developing a customer base for products or services? Cajoling members and others to attend your annual conference? Extending your brand into new markets? Simply trying to get some attention for the good works your members already do? Or perhaps you want all of the above? We've all heard the phrase "target marketing" for the last decade. It is the broad-based application for a simple concept: speaking in the most intimate way, with the highest degree of frequency to the people you want to reach most. Small associations are already crunched for time, personnel and money; you can't afford to waste any of the above on a scattered approach hoping to pick up members, customers, attendees or extending your brand.

The basics are as follows: decide who you need to reach, with what message, how you're going to deliver it, and how you're going to follow it up. It is far less important to have a slick brochure than to remember that all marketing success is based on reaching the right audience, with a compelling message, enough times so they can legitimately react to what you want them to do. That's why telephone and direct mail are still two of the most cost efficient means of communication available.

Quite often, when you receive a sophisticated brochure, you are impressed more by the money spent to create it than the message inside. There is no doubt that a beautifully designed brochure will attract attention in a world of clutter, but it is the creative concept behind the message that creates a call to action. No marketing gurus on your staff? Then outsource your project to professionals who can deliver a customized message that strikes a responsive chord with your audience. Concerned about the cost? Outside expertise is a lot cheaper than the money spent on an ineffective or amateur campaign. Remember: do what you do best, coordinate and manage expertise (internal or external) for the advantage of your constituents.

Some simple tips to make the process easier:

- Define your intended audience (target marketing)
- Create a simple message that can be absorbed quickly (response marketing)
- Choose the most efficient forms of delivery (reach/one-to-one marketing)
- Decide on the number of times the message will be received (frequency)
- Execute using the best resources available (internal or outsourcing)

Marketing Tools

E-mail—An e-mail message does not have to be the plain ASCII text model that we grew up with 5-7 years ago. You can now add color, movement and pictures without a programming genius on your staff. Plus most folks can now receive the files you send and open them without having attended "geek school" first. This small shift in reality is changing the way you should approach your audience.

Telephone—We all know that folks don't have time to take your message during the day. So don't make the call during the day; call on the weekends or in the evening and leave a voice mail alerting them to the message that you want them to hear or alerting them to the fact that they will be receiving a direct mail piece in the next few days. The calls can be extremely inexpensive (many programs are free these days on nights and weekends) and if you're a small association chances are your membership will be less than 1,000 members. That whole list can be called using voice mail in less than two weekends and you've reached the majority of your targeted audience in a personal fashion.

Publicity/Public Relations—Publicity and PR are two of the most cost-effective tools in your arsenal. Find a unique feature of your association or its members, a newsworthy item, an unusual twist to everyday business and take the message to the media. Don't wait for something to happen, look for the opportunity, create a new event, do something of value in your community, but identify all of the ways that your association brings benefit to your varied constituents and then flaunt it.

Fax/Direct Mail—Despite the efforts of the FCC and Congress to make faxing difficult, it is still an effective way to send messages to your target audience. The key to using fax efficiently is to make the message bold, but brief. Don't expect to "sell" via the fax, just to alert or remind. Direct mail is only as efficient as your list. If you are mailing to your membership, direct mail can be extremely effective, and you can target the message for each constituency represented within your group. If you are planning to reach new members through a direct mail campaign then the message has to be extremely compelling and the list needs to be very specific. If you can't assure that both of those criteria are met, don't waste the money.

Web Sites—If the site is exciting and user-friendly it will attract the casual user as well as the dyed-in-the-wool member. But a Web site must be kept current, it must offer tangible value for the time spent, and it must be information rich. If you don't have the expertise inside your shop, then outsource the design. Again, don't expect to have expertise in every area of your business; it is generally cheaper to hire expertise than to try and maintain it on your staff, and if you don't like what they've done, you can quickly find someone else.

Overview—Don't spend a dime unless you have a plan. Don't think that marketing is based upon the pasta theory: throw it against the wall to see if it sticks. Don't let a consultant or designer tell you about the value of "four-color" unless they first explain how a brochure will work in tandem with all of your other efforts. Use common sense. People have short attention spans and consider their time very valuable. Deliver your message in a simple, understandable way in the most direct fashion to the targeted audience you want to reach. You'll get the biggest bang for your buck and look like a hero on your bottom line. □



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