



Five Keys To Association Growth

By Jim Gawley, VP eMedia, ForbesAMG

1. Develop a Public Relations Strategy

It is extremely important to "brand" your association via a public relations strategy. As your organization is quoted in either general or trade press articles, it strengthens your brand within the industry. Potential members will better realize the value of membership in your association and you will start to get calls for member referrals within your industry. Members view referrals as an extremely valuable member benefit.

A press strategy needs to address the trade press and general press separately.

Trade Press – The goal of a PR program aimed at the trade press is to increase awareness of an association and its impact on the industry. Extensive coverage in the trade press can often lead to new member inquiries.

Press releases should be authored relating to notable association meetings with government, industry or other groups. What is "newsy" from those meetings? Were there action items or goals discussed? Were best practices reviewed? Were members commended or did they receive awards? This is all excellent content for a press release.

Additionally, web or email based survey results provide excellent content for press releases. Creating a series of surveys (for instance: four different weekly surveys on a related topic) can create very valuable industry insight. There are a number of low-cost, self-service survey hosting services available on the internet.

General Press – Associations are uniquely positioned to be valuable resources to members of the general press. Reporters value the industry statistics or comments association executives can provide for breaking news stories.

Distribute a press kit which provides an "About Us" document, a list of your association's goals and initiatives as well as a listing of topic areas where your organization could provide input for a story or interview. Include bios of association executives, board members or even members who could provide "expert assistance" for breaking news stories.

Association executives and board members should be listed on expert sites, such as:

PRNewswire ProfNet - <https://profnet.prnewswire.com/>

AllExperts - <http://www.allexperts.com/>

ExpertSource - <http://home.businesswire.com>

Press releases to the general press must be written differently than trade press. Consider the audience the newspaper or magazine is trying to reach and write your release accordingly. Even

if your release is not offering “breaking news,” often times association press releases hit editors at a time when they are working on a broader article and they welcome the additional information.

2. Get Personal In Your Marketing Efforts

What makes your member brochures or trade show promotions stand out in the stack of offers and information people receive every day? Do you think that because the recipient has “heard of” your association they will open your mail piece? Think again.

Personalization and customization of your direct mailing efforts can greatly improve response rates. Would you look more closely at a promotional piece that prominently displayed your name and company name, used images that were relevant to your interests and included your name as part of a web address?

The latest digital printing technologies offer the opportunity to personalize your mail pieces using member's names in various colors and fonts. Each piece can be customized, varying images or text, based on the member's industry, region or any other criteria. This is called Variable Data Printing or VDP.

VDP campaigns often utilize personalized URLs (web addresses), JaneDoe.Association.org, which allow you to offer a personalized and customized website and track who responded to your direct mail campaign.

Specific personalized URL applications for associations are:

Member acquisition mailings – Visitors to their personalized website would be greeted by name and the site would display content that was relevant to their needs. You could learn more about them by asking questions like “Is your primary business: industry supplier; manufacturing; wholesaling?” Their answer would be recorded and their visit would be logged, allowing for an immediate follow up opportunity.

Trade show or educational event mailings – Personalized websites simplify the registration process for events. All of the recipient’s information is pre-populated in the online registration form, plus the information on the website could be varied based on the recipient’s industry. For instance if you knew John Smith was an architect, the copy on his site would tout specific benefits of the event for architects.

Subscription renewal forms – If your association publishes a controlled circulation magazine, you could use personalized URLs for renewals. Subscribers’ personal information would be pre-populated so they would simply need to confirm their information and hit a resubscribe button. All subscriber information would be captured in a database.

Personalized URLs are also very effective in driving traffic to sweepstakes entry pages and eNewsletter subscription forms.

*You can download a free ForbesAMG whitepaper on personalization **A Marketer’s Guide to Personalization and Variable Data Printing** at www.forbesamg.com/vdp/forbesvdppaper.pdf*

3. Modernize Your Educational Offerings

Busy schedules and shrinking travel budgets are making it difficult to fill seats at educational events. As majority of businesses now utilize high speed internet connections, the web is becoming a valuable tool for associations to offer "virtual" educational products.

Webinars allow participants to view a PowerPoint presentation via an internet connection and listen to audio either on the phone or through their computer's speakers. They can also ask questions using text messaging. Presenter's can participate from the comfort of their offices, so there are no travel expenses incurred when you ask an industry leader or government official to participate in your webinar. Webinars should be limited to between 60 to 90 minutes.

Teleconferences and podcasts can be used to broadcast short interviews or industry updates. However, the length of these should be limited to 30 minutes or less.

All of these types of "virtual seminars" are all easily archived on the web, creating another information resource for members of your association.

4. Provide Exceptional Customer/Member Service

Are incoming voice mail and email messages responded to promptly and in a pleasant and courteous manner? Does your staff take the time to completely understand a member's request and provide a thorough response?

Excellent customer service greatly improves the chances that a member will pay his or her renewal dues. It is not difficult to provide outstanding member service, but it does require dedication and "buy-in" from management and the entire staff.

A few things to get you started include:

1. Set a policy that phone calls and emails are responded to quickly. Preferably no more than 24 hours. Even a quick "It will take me two days to gather the information you requested" is better than letting the member "hang" for two or three days with no response. Establish a protocol for forwarding voice mail and email for people who are on vacation or out sick.
2. Educate your entire staff about all association products and services so they can answer simple questions about membership, publications and trade shows. No one likes to be transferred multiple times to find the answer to a simple question.
3. Empower everyone to be "order takers." When a person calls and is ready to join your association, attend a trade show or order a publication, they should not be told "The person who handles that is not available..."
4. Publish the answers to a list of industry related and association related "Frequently Asked Questions" and distribute to your staff. The FAQs can be published on your website if appropriate.

5. Improve Member Communication

Is your only communication with members a newsletter and a letter included with their membership renewal?

Members need to be reminded about the benefits your organization offers them, their company and the industry.

What type of information can you provide?

- New member benefits (Affinity programs, content added to your website, etc.)
- Reminders about current benefits (Don't let them forget about content on your website, whitepapers or member directories)
- News of meetings with Govt. officials or your lobbying efforts
- Summaries of important industry meetings attended by your staff
- Excerpts from any publications your association publishes
- Industry news items from other sources
- Results of member or industry surveys

One of the most effective ways of keeping an ongoing dialog with members is via an email newsletter. Email newsletters are cost effective and you can disseminate information much faster than via regular mail. Plus with eNewsletters you can track who is "opening" the email and what they are reading.

Email newsletters are the perfect vehicle for short, single question surveys to learn more about the pulse of the industry or discover unmet member needs.

It is also very effective to -

- Use your printed newsletters to remind members about the specific benefits from member services.
- Insert information about member benefits and services when fulfilling publication orders or trade show badges.
- Develop a series of post cards to keep your association "top of mind" throughout the year.

About the author – Prior to joining ForbesAMG, Jim Gawley held a variety of positions with a New Jersey-based food trade association. During his 15 years with the organization he developed innovative member retention & recruitment campaigns, launched the company's first website and produced a series of eNewsletters for a number of international food associations. The total daily circulation of the association eNewsletters under his management was over 110,000.

Jim continues to work with associations across all industries to find innovative ways to improve their marketing efforts. He also develops content rich eNewsletter programs for ForbesAMG clients.

Jim is a graduate of Boston University and was recently a "Thought Leader" at a Frost & Sullivan seminar on Online Marketing. He has been interviewed on CNN, as well as CNN Financial Network and has been quoted in the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, USA Today and many local and regional newspapers.