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WHAT IF YOU COULD WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN?
Let your imagination run wild: A creative exercise in starting over
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2020 LOOK AHEAD
A new year. New plans. New goals. New budgets. New challenges. We reached out to a few associations of various staff and budget sizes to get some insight on what publishing and communications teams are looking forward to in 2020.

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BREAK OUT THE BULLHORN
It’s not enough to market to members and prospects. Here’s why you should focus on the broader public, too.
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SALUTE TO AM&P’S 2019 VOLUNTEERS
Thank you to all the volunteers who gave back to this association over the past 12 months. You helped strengthen AM&P and your peers, as well as the association publishing profession and its knowledge base.
When We Say Blank Slate …

We asked people to imagine creating a publishing program by starting from zero. So we took the same approach with our cover.

John Foss: ‘Be Creative and Make the Most of Each Print Run’

John Foss, sales manager for New Hampshire-based Cummings Printing, encourages associations to partner with their printers on new ideas — and not to choose a partner strictly on cost.
It’s not enough to market to members and prospects. Here’s why you should focus on the broader public, too.

BY JAMES E. MEYERS

How effective is your association’s marketing strategy?

I’m not talking about raising awareness among members, potential members, and other key audiences such as lawmakers. That’s all well and good, and you need to keep doing it. I’m talking about spreading a message to the public, to the broader world. I’m talking about communicating to people who have probably never heard of you and who probably won’t ever become members.

It may sound counterintuitive, but an outward marketing focus is more important today than it ever has been. Every company, even every individual, is relentlessly focused on its brand and message. Associations cannot be an exception. I won’t mince words here: Marketing has the capacity to save you.

Forward-looking association CEOs realize this. In the more than a decade he’s been working with associations, Seth Kahan, who advises association leadership on innovation through his company, Visionary Leadership, has seen more and more C-suite emphasis on a strategic path forward that’s built around taking the value an association creates and communicating it more broadly. There are two steps to this. One is to think about how the field you represent can have a massive impact on the world. The next step is showcasing that impact — the value that comes from the profession of nursing or financial planning or geophysics.

You can showcase that impact in two ways: first for an audience made up of your members, as a way of inspiring them. You’ve probably always done that. But secondly, and maybe more importantly, you need to showcase this value publicly. That’s where a new way of thinking about marketing strategy comes in.

You may think this doesn’t apply to you, that your association is different — because you’re a scientific society or business-to-business profession. You may think your industry has no business broadcasting to the broader world. It would be a waste of resources. Not so. There’s tremendous value in spreading a broad marketing message — one that will directly benefit not only your association but also your members. “Members always feel like the world doesn’t appreciate them and doesn’t understand what they do. Plus, how do you get universities
to value physiology as a discipline and to fund it,” says Scott Steen, executive director of the American Physiological Society. Well, guess what? “Funders follow the public; politicians follow the public,” Steen says.

In some industries, you may find that your constituents don’t inherently understand that positioning. In others, they’re well aware. “There’s a greater awareness on the part of the scientific community that they have relevance, but they haven’t done an effective job communicating that relevance,” says Chris McEntee, executive director and CEO of the American Geophysical Union.

That’s where associations come in. That expert soon led workshops in the 17 states that committed to upholding the standards of the Paris Agreement on climate change — a move well within American Forests’ mission but guaranteed to resonate beyond the organization’s typical audience.

When it came to much of American Forests’ outreach, the new intended audience wasn’t just environmental science journals or niche publications where it had been featured historically or felt comfortable. The organization worked to get mentions in The New York Times, The Washington Post, even People magazine.

The publicity had a domino effect. Mentions in the media helped lead to grant funding. Grant funding helped lead to more good work and increased credibility, which in turn helped build high-impact programs and a broader public policy agenda. That new scientifically driven agenda was generated with specific communications planning around it, which led to more prominent media mentions. Those mentions helped fuel robust social media participation and even celebrity partnerships.

Membership soared, and the organization became much less reliant on the corporate support that had been its lifeblood and left it vulnerable to economic downturns and corporate budget cuts.

Executed strategically, marketing can change everything. The problem is that most associations weren’t set up with an emphasis on marketing. They were built to serve their members — steadfastly, diligently, but often quietly. That simply doesn’t fly today. This is a very different way of thinking than just publishing a magazine that’s distributed to members or other communication that’s focused on internal audiences. I’m talking about reaching for something bigger.

THINKING MAINSTREAM

When you start to think about changing the external perception of your association, your outreach will naturally shift in its focus and content. Steen recalls his previous role as president and CEO of American Forests, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting and restoring forestland. When he took over, it was losing money and its best years seemed behind it. When he walked in the door, the way he viewed it, his mission was to reposition the organization for “another century of relevance.” That meant creating a very public profile.

One of his first changes, Steen recalls, was to update all of the public-facing parts of the organization, from the website to the staff overseeing communications. He made new hires, including bringing in a well-known expert on climate change.

“Members always feel like the world doesn’t appreciate them and doesn’t understand what they do... Well, guess what? Funders follow the public, politicians follow the public.”

Scott Steen, Executive Director, American Physiological Society

ATTRACTION NONMEMBERS

Marketing to the public doesn’t just mean spreading the word through PR and advertising.

Peggy Winton, president of the Association for Intelligent Information Management (AIIM), has a background in technology marketing and long ago realized that when it came to AIIM, the value of non-dues-paying members was higher than joiners who just pay their dues and don’t engage. When people are interested in engaging, even if they’re not members, that leads to a community — a community constantly looking for products and services rather than consuming passively.
On the flip side, AIIM serves sellers of technology — so the organization serves both the buy side and the sell side. The association needed a model mutually beneficial to its buy-side and sell-side audiences. On the buy side, a membership is still available. That allows access to certain premium content, virtual events, and access to ongoing help with challenges, as well as training and certification — and is most relevant to career technology professionals.

The sell-side audience has become a larger part of AIIM’s business model. Those companies love the line of business consumer — the one who’s less likely to become a lifetime member — Winton says, because they are usually shopping for a technology solution for the first time. They are often actively seeking solutions because they’ve been tasked with a particular technology challenge.

Those vendors have become key partners in the content production. They might pay $15,000, for example, to be the exclusive sponsor of a webinar, or they might underwrite research on a particular topic and get featured in the resulting research report. There are two key elements that make this model work. One is that they become part of the educational offering. The other is that the content remains educational, not sales driven.

Because so much of the organization’s strategy is centered on content that’s free to consume, AIIM is relentlessly focused on data collection. The community, as Winton calls it, is made up of 150,000 active subscribers — that is, those who have raised their hand and agreed to take some kind of qualified action, such as downloading a white paper, which enables the organization to know who they are. From there, the focus is intensely on nurturing and tracking leads. Using those leads, AIIM staff can see how well content is performing, which topics are resonating, and who’s most engaged.

The whole operation, Winton says, revolves around the intelligence the organization is constantly collecting and responding to. “That’s the point where most associations fail,” Winton says. “They don’t consider themselves the marketing machines they should be.”

Peggy Winton, President, Association for Intelligent Information Management

That realization changed how she thought about the business.

Her focus shifted to forming a broad community that could be monetized. Winton’s first job, she says, was to produce from scratch a portfolio of content-driven programs, including webinars, research reports, and a variety of other content assets.

In many cases, users pay nothing to access those assets. “Eighty percent of what we do is free,” Winton says. She’s not concerned about giving so much away because of the model she’s built.

One of the association’s challenges, Winton says, came as its audience shifted in recent years. Information manage-

James E. Meyers is president, CEO, and founder of Imagination and has created award-winning content marketing programs for associations for 25 years. Meyers received the 2019 Mitch Mohanna Lifetime Achievement Award at the Association Media & Publishing Annual Meeting in June. This article is an excerpt from Meyers’ book for association leaders, Becoming Essential.