Promises You Kept in 2017 (and a Few You Didn’t)
Plus: Plans You’re Making for 2018

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PROMISES & PLANS
A new year is always filled with new plans, new goals, new budgets, and new challenges. Last year in this issue, we took a look at where association publishing teams planned to focus their resources in 2017. Now that 2017 is behind us, *Signature* checked back in with some of these associations to see how things turned out. We also asked AM&P members of various staff and budget sizes to predict where they will put their creative and monetary energies in 2018.

*SIGNATURE STAFF REPORT*

YOUR TRENDING TOPICS IN 2017
A great way to tell what was important to your association publishing peers is to see what they were reading. Each week in *Sidebar* e-newsletter, we bring featured articles about, by, and for AM&P members. Here are the Top 10 most-read articles of the year — plus, two honorable mentions.

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Brand Statement
A CEO with their hands all over the flagship publication? Obsessed with her association’s communications and content, Cheryl Durst wouldn’t have it any other way.

BY CARLA KALOGERIDIS

CORRECTION
On page 11 of the October-November 2017 issue of Signature, AMGA’s name was incorrectly stated. The headline should have read, “AMGA Connects Helpers with Those in Need.” AMGA was formerly known as the American Medical Group Association. Signature sincerely regrets the error.
With a dual degree in print journalism and economics — and a whole slew of credentials after her name — Cheryl S. Durst, Hon. FIIDA, LEED AP, executive vice president and CEO of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) — rose through the ranks in the association world from, yes, the marketing and communications department.

“My hope was to be a writer for the Wall Street Journal,” she tells Signature. “I honed the skill of putting arcane subject matter into an easily accessible format for the reader. It’s very important for our members to be able to explain the value of their profession, and that’s what we help them do. I’m a firm believer that people need to be able to articulate all subject matter, so a journalism or communications degree would serve anyone in any field.”

Because of where she came from — even with 15,000 members across 58 countries to take care of — Durst remains very involved in her association’s publishing and communications activities. While overseeing the strategic direction of IIDA, she also curates and publishes Perspective, the association’s members-only, thought-leadership journal. “My fingerprints are all over it,” she says. “I’m not a control freak, but I am a wordsmith, a lover of words. I take great care with
language. There’s not a piece of written communication that leaves this association without my seeing it.

“Words matter,” she continues. “It’s critical to get it right because it’s an investment in your organization. It’s your brand. The language your organization uses in aggregate ultimately forms its identity.”

She recognizes that not all association CEOs would agree with her focus on communications. “There’s a tendency — and it’s easy to let this happen — for association CEOs to be complacent about communications,” she says, “to just let the communications professional be the communications professional. Most association CEOs only pay attention to it when they are in crisis communication mode. But CEOs must be cognizant of communication because we have so many more tools now to create the organization’s brand in digital and new media.”

In addition to overseeing IIDA communications, Durst also manages a team of 25 professional staff members, leads the 10-member international board of directors, and directs all outreach and programmatic efforts, including more than a dozen global design competitions, which recognize worldwide excellence in interior design. She is known as an exceptional communicator, innovator, and visionary leader and is credited with spurring progress, driving change, and encouraging expansion of the interior design industry. She’s an obsessive reader and loves new technology.

She also loves social media. “Social media appeals to the voyeur that lives in all of us,” Durst says. “My online persona is the same for my personal and business lives. I can’t have multiple personalities on Facebook and Instagram.”

As a passionate consumer of news and information, Durst says she follows “lots of folks” on social media, admitting that social has cut into her fiction reading time. “There’s so much information, and the challenge is finding the time to

“The print magazine is emblematic of who we are,” Durst says. “It’s our brand statement.”
filter through it. I wish a trusted source could send me articles and blogs with the header, ‘These are the 10 things — personally and professionally — that you really need to read this week.’ No one has accomplished that yet,” she says.

**AT THE CORE OF COMMUNICATIONS**

The central driver behind all she does in communications for IIDA is a commitment to achieving broad recognition for the value of design and its significant role in society. “The beauty of design is a natural part of life,” Durst says. “It affects both functionality and engagement in every day work spaces and the built environment. It’s not just physical space — it’s an experience.”

About 90 percent of IIDA members are designing workplaces. With recent unrest and acts of violence in the world, Durst says workplace design has taken on even greater importance. “Now, our members are designing for safety, security, and civility,” she says. Durst works to promote an understanding of how design impacts human behavior and affects all aspects of shared spaces.

Her content has a unique and specific focus, and she relies on a staff director of content to manage it. IIDA also outsources content creation to Imagination, working closely with their team on story lines and developing sources. She pays very close attention to the publication’s design, including the feel of the paper. “If I can’t captivate my members with design, I will lose them before they read a word,” Durst says. “It comes down to credibility for us. Our members are so in synch with design trends and the design experience that we absolutely must deliver on that with every issue.”

That said, it’s no surprise that the magazine has a starring role in the association’s mission and vision. “We exist to advance and elevate the interior design industry and profession,” she says. “Our members actually take our magazine with them to visit clients and use it to engage in conversations about design. It’s a community-building and teaching tool. It’s inspirational and aspirational.”
When considering print versus digital, Durst has an interesting perspective. “I used to think it was totally generational,” she says. “But the print magazine is emblematic of who we are. It’s our brand statement, and because we are all about physical design, that requires something tangible.”

**IIDA PERSONA IN PRINT, DIGITAL, AND ONLINE**

Durst says IIDA has been deliberate in its decision to not go all digital, although she acknowledges that many associations are heading that way. Members can elect to read *Perspective* online if that’s their preference, but IIDA also has a designed-for-digital version in the works, which will allow them to extend the print conversation and help members dive deeper with relevant links “to take the reader to the next place.”

“It will allow our members to know more, about more. I’m excited about digital,” Durst says.

When it comes to the IIDA website, Durst says, “We have sexy and non-sexy goals.” IIDA needs a better way to manage its information, so it will implement a new CRM with better design and more responsiveness. “We have way too many words on the site, so we will simplify all the language and upgrade the look and feel and consistency,” she notes.

“Anyone in interior design will be able to come to our site for more information, but the site will also increase public awareness of the work done by trained professionals,” Durst continues. “IIDA is very much an advocate for the design industry.”

The association is also more focused on increasing its visibility on social media. “We serve multiple generations, and that’s how they access information. Our members are engaged on platforms like Instagram because of the visual content,” Durst says. “Social media is another voice the association has. We get that, but it doesn’t mean that we don’t grapple with how to deploy it and measuring the ROI. Many of us in the association space struggle intellectually and personally with, ‘What does it all mean?’ You’re just trying to communicate something to someone.”

Durst says it’s not selecting the content delivery mechanism that challenges her and the IIDA team — their questions are more about the content itself.

“What do people want to read? What are their expectations? Are they reading us cover to cover or just one or two articles?” she asks. “The magazine is a member benefit, so we must live up to being a member benefit. Is it changing their lives in some way? Is it compelling, up-to-the-moment content? We must pay attention to how people like to learn.”

And Durst acknowledges another content-related challenge: relevancy to a diverse audience. “We have one publication trying to meet a lot of needs, from CEOs and thought leaders to professors and students and practicing interior designers,” she says. “I could see us considering niche publications at some point in the future because each of these groups has a different viewpoint on design, and we need to acknowledge that.”

*Carla Kalogeridis is publisher and editorial director of Signature.*