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Feature

Maximize Your Media
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Too many associations hamstringing their communication efforts by failing to match their message to the right medium. Here are some ways to make smart choices--and avoid potential pitfalls.

By: *Craig Webb*

Too many associations practice one-media-fits-all communication. Here, a communication guru shows how to best match medium to message to make sure what you want to say is said how you want to say it, reaches who you want it to reach, and ensures that you're using the right messenger at the right time.

A senior executive once urged me to stop printing traditional stories in our association's newspaper and instead publish articles that resembled PowerPoint slides. The members who matter want that kind of quick-scanning, bullet-pointed summarization, not acres of words, she said.

At first her idea seemed as silly as when Monty Python staged *Wuthering Heights* in semaphore. But ultimately I came to recognize her underlying point--that messages work best when you think first about the audience's characteristics and then try to find the best way to deliver your information.

It's a lesson that far too few associations appear to have learned. Many groups' messaging efforts come in the one-size-fits-all category, in which the same verbiage and style are employed regardless of the communication vehicle. Just as bad are associations that set off in a new medium without first examining whether it's appropriate. Either way, the results usually are unfulfilled members and unhappy faces when association people discuss their communication efforts.

Association communication professionals need to become what I call [media maximizers](#)--skilled craftsmen capable of using many different tools to help the organization succeed. To do so, associations first need to think about their goals. Then they need to learn how to master three variables: the message, the medium, and the materials at hand.

The American Hospital Association in Chicago did that a few years ago by technologically harnessing an ancient communication medium: the human voice. Its president, Dick Davidson, is a compelling speaker, but for years that talent was restricted to meetings and speeches. Then, when the AHA had to send out some information designed to persuade hospitals to take action on a healthcare issue, it decided to ask Davidson to give the presentation in a Webinar-style format. Adding Davidson's voice to the slides made the presentation so effective that the AHA now employs the format several times a year for its most important initiatives.

The AHA's ability to harmonize message (rallying the troops), medium (audiovisual technology), and materials at hand (Davidson's voice and personality) produced something wonderful--and all too rare. One major obstacle toward achieving this harmony is that new ways to communicate crop up every day. For

instance, Virgin Mobile USA and the social network YouthNoise have created a serialized story that's delivered to mobile phones in chapters of just 160 characters each. (That last sentence took up 146 characters.) Too often, associations don't thoroughly think through the pros and cons before jumping into something new.

"You need to fight the gee-whiz factor," says Shawn Zehnder Lea, vice president for strategic communications at the Mississippi Hospital Association, Madison. "Hospital volunteers could care less about a blog, but if you say, 'I posted pictures of you from the meeting online,' they want to look at that."

Weighing the Value of Blogs

The seeming rush toward blogs exemplifies gee-whiz technology that deserves a skeptical look. Blogs' most-touted advantage over most other media is that they allow individuals to send quick, informal, personal, and above all opinionated messages to the world. Several bloggers and experts told me that blogs are great because they "tell the rest of the story," the part that doesn't get into the news release.

Now ask yourself: Just how much does your association want to reveal about its inner workings? How sharp are your elbows? Will the CEO do a slow burn when someone else in the association becomes more famous than him? I would argue that some of the most successful association blogs, such as the oft-cited *Shopfloor* blog at the National Association of Manufacturers (<http://blog.nam.org>), work largely because they do things the typical association isn't willing to do. Thus, an opinionated, personal blog probably will be inappropriate if your association favors the editorial "we" and unifying messages.

On the other hand, blogs have their advantages, provided you match the medium to the message and materials. The fact that blogs also can be used as cheap and easy-to-maintain Web sites made them catnip to the Mississippi Hospital Association's Lea. Her group's constituents span several dozen types of hospital workers--administrators, clinicians, nurses, supply folks, maintenance people, and so forth--who all are highly interested in certain healthcare information but couldn't care less about the rest. So Lea created 21 blogs, each one a newsletter serving a particular MHA subgroup. Now she drops into each blog only the content that would appeal to that particular type of hospital worker. The result? Each group feels it's getting personalized service, and Lea does no more work than she would have had she been dumping the info into one general site.

Matching Message to Medium

The Mississippi story is just one example of adapting a medium to the need. (See sidebar "Small \$\$\$, Big Ideas" on for more low-budget ways to use new technology.) At other times, however, the challenge isn't finding the medium but rather figuring out how to adjust your message to take advantage of a particular medium's qualities.

Ben Cohen, cofounder of the Ben & Jerry's ice cream company, showed his mastery of this issue when he went on National Public Radio's *Marketplace* program last summer to discuss his work on behalf of reducing the defense budget. Midway through a five-minute discussion, Cohen made a point about nuclear proliferation by tossing one BB into a metal container. Clank! That one BB, he said, represented several times the atomic power that blew up Hiroshima. Then he tossed in six BBs--enough, he said, to obliterate Russia.

Then Cohen released 10,000 BBs--the equivalent of America's nuclear arsenal--into the container in a loud, steady stream. For just under half a minute, the program consisted of nothing but the sound of those BBs clanking into the container. Hearing those 10,000 BBs--and imagining what they represented--made a powerful argument. But if Cohen had been televised pouring the BBs, it would have looked like what it was--a sound effect.

Many associations don't think much about what makes a communication medium special, and they suffer the consequences as a result. This is particularly the case when organizations deliver a product in a new way. For instance, suppose you abandon your print magazine and instead post articles in PDF format on your Web site. Yes, you've cut printing costs, but you also eliminated what is arguably the greatest advantage of a publication: the feeling readers get from holding something in their hands and, by leafing through the pages, immersing themselves into your association's world for an extended time. Instead, you've created something that's harder to open, harder to manipulate, and harder to read online--not to mention tougher for maintaining that sustained feeling of belonging to your group.

When you move a product from one medium to another, what you're doing isn't migration; it's mutation. You must decide whether that change is for the good.

Different Conclusions, Maximum Results

At the American Industrial Hygiene Association in Fairfax, Virginia, Lisa Junker, CAE, came to that fork in the

road and went both ways. Junker, senior manager for communications, decided to keep printing the association's monthly magazine because the format "is better for reading quickly, for tearing out pages." She says she doesn't think many copies get archived.

On the other hand, when Junker's group and the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists decided three years ago to end publication of their established journals and create the jointly published *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene*, they chose to provide the new journal primarily online. Members must pay an extra premium to receive the print edition. Since then, they have found that only 1,200 of AIHA's 11,800 members choose the print version. Junker says this is because the electronic version is easier to search for articles, and the societies can publish important findings more quickly than when the journal appeared solely in print.

Online's advantages are only likely to grow in time. Junker says she looks forward to the day when authors' articles include videos that show graphically new ways to protect workers, as well as sound clips and huge datasets that the reader can manipulate. She noted that some online publishing partners already offer to automatically link certain terms, such as the name of a gene to the Human Genome Project or a drug name to the *Physician's Desk Reference*. Just as television moved far beyond its origins as radio with fuzzy pictures, the online journal is on its way to becoming something far different than its predecessor.

Keeping the Customer--and Association--Satisfied

Junker's group was able to make a fairly seamless transition in part because it could take advantage of what is now well-developed software for creating academic journals. But it also could capitalize on the fact that its members had reached a certain level of technology use. Not all associations can say the same. Some groups represent people who don't spend much time in front of a computer. Other associations (academic societies in particular) are plagued by the fact that their members never seem to stay in the same place for very long in any given day, and when school's out they often can't be reached electronically at all. Blogs might well be wasted on them.

In other cases, the association's challenge is to figure out a way to migrate a product to another medium while retaining its basic intent. The American Hospital Association did that with *Health Forum Journal*, a low-circulation, money-losing quarterly known for long, thoughtful essays on the future of healthcare. *Health Forum Journal* was converted into an adjunct of AHA's flagship magazine, *Hospitals & Health Networks*, and was renamed *H&HN Online*. The focus remained the same, but the length of the articles was slashed, usually to 600 words with a few concessions going as high as 1,500.

The result? *H&HN Online* isn't *Health Forum Journal*; there's no more feel of paper on the hands. But *H&HN Online* also enjoys readership that's several times larger than *Health Forum Journal*, there's enough advertising to turn a profit, and AHA continues to provide a home for thoughtful (albeit shorter) essays on where healthcare is heading.

Got a Minute? An Hour?

Many of the examples cited above involved tradeouts and transitions, but just as often the issue before an association is whether to create something new without dropping any current tasks. This brings us back to the "materials at hand" question. Although going multiplatform (as the entertainment industry would say) is getting easier, making sure each medium succeeds is far tougher--and more time consuming--than one might at first think.

Ed Hiscock knows the feeling. He leads the publications department at the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America in Lawrence, Kansas, where his staff runs the GCSAA magazine, a weekly newsletter, a daily publication during the association's trade show, and a blog. He likes the way the blog lets his reporters tell stories that they couldn't previously, such as one writer's experiences covering the way superintendents helped their compatriots recover after Hurricane Katrina.

However, Hiscock says, "when our staffers cover an event, the blog hasn't been top of mind. Staff do what they have to, then sometimes find themselves blogging in their hotel rooms late at night. That's not a good way of working. We, like a lot of others, are trying to work our way around this. ... At what point are we asking our staffs to do too much?"

The National Association of Manufacturers' main blogger, Pat Cleary, talks about his site not entailing much work. But look closer at his site, and you'll find many of Cleary's postings occur before 8 a.m. and after 6 p.m. His passion sustains him. Will your staff be as eager?

They're Just Not Into You

Let's say you think you have the right message, medium, and materials. Even with all that, your initiative still might fail. Online forums are a good example.

Many associations start forums with the best of intentions: usually to give members a place to trade information, argue proposals, and generally heighten their sense of being part of a community. Nevertheless, I have rarely heard of an association forum where traffic ranges beyond marginal. Why? I believe it's because association forums typically lack two qualities: passion and familiarity.

In contrast, go to www.gardenweb.com. There you'll find close to 400 discussion forums on topics such as bromeliads, vermicomposting, and gardening in the Pacific Northwest. It stays busy; I checked 15 forums at random recently and found 12 had entries from that day or the day before. Gardenweb succeeds because its participants have a passion for horticulture. In contrast, most associations are related to a profession, and for most people, an avocation engenders far stronger feelings than any vocation.

You could argue Gardenweb also does well because its potential membership base is so huge. That's true. So consider a listserver I belong to for ex-employees of United Press International. *The Downhold Wire* has just 300 members but is on track to record more than 10,300 messages this year, or close to 30 per day. This listserver works in part because "Unipressers," as we call ourselves, are passionate about the news and how it's covered. But it also works because we all share a history of working in close collaboration to get out the news. Most of us have never met, but we knew each other back in the day via our shared message wire. *The Downhold Wire* in effect continues what we did at work every day.

In the past, associations could delude themselves into thinking that everyone lapped up everything we did. It's only recently that we've had technology that finds, for example, that only about 30 percent of the people on an association's e-mail newsletter list actually open up the newsletter. Similarly, the statistics on Web forum visits and replies to blogs are sobering reminders of just how popular we really are. We should know better now and use that information to figure into future communications decisions.

Stamp Out Single-Mindedness

In Mississippi, Lea works basically with one assistant; yet she manages a Web site, 21 blog-style newsletters, a print newsletter, an e-mail newsletter, and a quarterly magazine. She also blogs at home, can write HTML tags, takes tons of photos, added audio to the Web site this year, and just found out her camera can record video clips.

Lea comes by all this because her father had his own darkroom, she has a master's degree in literature, and before she joined MHA, she worked at a newspaper and was creative director at an ad agency. For her, being a [media maximizer](#) is no big deal. Unfortunately, I have met few association people whose skills go beyond one form of communication, usually print.

"It's not a luxury to think in terms of multiple media," Lea says. "It's a necessity."

All of which brings me back to that VP who wanted me to write my stories as PowerPoint presentations. She probably won't read this story; it's just too long. But she did have a point. [Access this article](#) on the *Associations Now* section of www.asaecenter.org to see what that would look like.

Until September, Craig Webb was manager, strategic communications, at the United States Telecom Association in Washington, DC. He is now editor of ProSales magazine in Washington. Previously he ran a half-dozen Web sites, the daily newsletter, the weekly newspaper, and the online store at the American Hospital Association. He also built and manages the Web site for the Medical Fitness Association. E-mail: craiglwebb@verizon.net

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