Can You Hear Me Now?

By Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

Two recent experiences reminded me of how difficult it has become to make sure that your membership message is getting out there, and getting heard. Both situations pointed out how many pitfalls there are in today's marketplace.

In the first instance, I spoke to a professional society Chapter Leadership Conference, and I was asked to gear my presentation to the importance of ongoing membership recruitment and retention. The meeting planner explained that the group was very stagnant in membership growth and she (the meeting planner) wanted me to try to "light a fire" under their Chapter leaders. She had even come up with a title for my program. She said "We're calling your session 'If You Build It, They Will Come.'"

I didn't really care for that particular title, but I told the meeting planner that it sounded fine (I learned awhile back not to be critical of ideas presented by the person who signs your honorarium check). I did the program and it seemed to go quite well, and I ended the program by repeating the title – "If you build it, they will come!"

But I didn't believe it.

Certainly I agree that you have to build a good membership message, and you definitely have to spend time and money to build your organization's image. However, there is more to it than that. What I wanted to tell the attendees was "Yes, if you build it they will come, but not if they *don't know you built it*!"

A great message means nothing if it doesn't get to the right people the right way. Just because your organization has something of value to offer members and potential members doesn't mean they're out there trying to find you-you've got to *find them*, and then you have to convince them of the value of membership.

In the second instance, I was speaking to a trade association in the construction industry. Having worked for such a group for several years, and being familiar with the industry, I was anxious to read through their literature to see how they were positioning themselves in the crowded field of construction associations (there are literally thousands of local, state, and national construction groups). As I picked up their basic membership brochure, I saw that they had adopted a marketing slogan to catch the attention of the members/prospects. Their slogan was "XYZ Association-the best kept secret in the construction industry."

I hated it.

I hated it because it basically said (at least as I read it), "You probably never heard of us but after you read this material we want you to send us money and join anyway."

What kind of a message is that? You don't want your association to be "the best kept secret" in your industry or profession. You want your organization to be the best KNOWN organization in the industry or profession. You want to be identified as the leader, not some group that's in hiding. This is about getting your message out there, not participating in some witness protection program for associations. Why would you have a marketing slogan that emphasizes the fact that you aren't very good at getting your message out?

The reason I bring these two experiences up is because they point out how sometimes we get too close to our information and our message, and we don't listen to them the way our members and prospects will. These situations also point out the need for organizations to be constantly searching for the message that makes the organization stand out from all the others. Given the incredible amount of competition we have for the attention of our members and prospects, we need to work on the developing the clearest possible message and delivering it with the utmost efficiency.

Staying "On Message"

It's always a struggle for membership marketers to decide what to put into their membership message. You hate to leave out any of the really great benefits your organization offers, but you also don't want your message to get too cluttered with a long list of programs and services. You want to focus your message to the needs of the prospect, but you don't want it to be so narrow that you lose the chance to entice some marginally interested people or companies. How do you decide what to leave out and what to include?

I guess I'm pretty old fashioned, but maybe - even in the "new marketplace"- we can stick to some basics. Maybe we can keep our message focused by using the tried and true "need-to-know, nice-to-know" theory. Figure out what your prospects/members *need* to know in order to make a decision to join, or to respond, or to attend, or to go to your website, or whatever decision you want them to make. Use the "need-to-know" information to get their attention and get them started toward the action you want. Then, if there is room in the letter or brochure or email, identify some of the information that would be "nice-to-know" about your organization. Although this technique for determining content has been around for a long time, it still has some validity today. In fact, given the ultra-short attention span of most of our members/prospects, maybe it's a <u>good</u> time to start using this philosophy again.

Spanning the Spam

Of course, just having the right message doesn't assure it will get read. Organizations are facing a really critical "Catch 22" in communications right now. In order to get our message out as fast as possible (a true necessity in today's business world), we rely on electronic communications. However, just when most people are getting comfortable with electronic communications (studies show

that email has overtaken the telephone as the number one business communications tool) along comes three things that are causing havoc in our well-planned member and prospect marketing plan. These four things are related. They are:

1) spam
2) spam filters
3) viruses , and
4) do not contact regulations

Spam (junk email) is causing problems in two ways. First, it clutters up so much of our members/prospects' email that our legitimate message is getting lost. If they don't recognize who sent the email, there is little chance it will get opened. Even if we can get them to open our email, they give us only a nanosecond (actually, about 2.5 seconds, according to the Direct Marketing Association) to get their attention and to get them to read further. This clutter causes people to delete so much daily email that the level of frustration rises to the point where people are already frustrated and time-challenged by the time they get to our membership messages.

Spam filters are designed to help keep some of that clutter off of people's computer screens, but not all spam filters operate the same way. In my case, I know that many legitimate messages are getting caught in my spam filter, messages I wanted and needed to get. Because the spam filter didn't recognize the content or the sender or the way some the messages were formatted, they were sent to the spam filter. Knowing that the filter picks up some wanted messages, I have to review all the spam anyway, just to make sure that nothing I wanted got caught. Where's the time and effort savings here?

In addition to all the spam, we also have to deal with the literal plague of computer **viruses** that have infected millions of computers in the past months. The fear of having a virus invade their computers causes many members and prospects to delete anything that has an attachment, or is sent from an unrecognized source, or that is forwarded from an unknown source. Some companies configure the computers to actually prevent them from downloading attachments that don't meet certain criteria.

Is your organization's message among those being automatically rejected? Do members and prospects ever see your message, however on target and effective it might be? If you can't get them to open/read your message, how will you ever get them to join or participate?

As if that wasn't enough, now associations and other membership organizations are getting caught in the middle of the **do not contact** issue. The do not call list started it, then came the do not fax ruling and subsequent retraction (maybe) and now we're seeing the do not email movement move in. While the association community is fighting for membership organizations to be granted relief from some of these new laws, it just seems as though the battle for the time and attention of members and prospects gets tougher every day.

So what's the answer? Maybe here isn't any one answer, but there are a few things organizations can do to help get their messages through to the target markets.

-Develop attachment-free communications systems. Just because it's easy for association staffers to attach a memo and send it with the email doesn't mean anyone is reading it. There are too many auto-deletes of attachments because of virus fears.

-Develop and communicate unique signatures on your email communications to your members. Give them the information they need to help their system recognize and accept your organization's messages

-Automate responses to the most common communications and guide members/prospects to appropriate web pages and sites

-Give your members the information/wording they need to inform their IT people to allow your contacts and information though their systems. Here is a sample of what one organizations used;

"Please add xyzorganization@xyz.org to your safe-sender email list so all future communications will avoid being caught in your SPAM filters, and please forward this message to the appropriate IT professionals in your company or organization."

Having a good message is essential. Getting it through to your targeted audiences is a must.

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