

Chapter 9

CHAPTER COMMUNICATIONS

This chapter addresses the following topics:

- Overview
- How to Improve Your Communications Management
- Involving Your Reader
- Executing Professionally
- How to Avoid Legal Pitfalls
- Budget Basics and Tips for Communications
- A Checklist for Newsletter Production and Planning
- Innovating and Adapting in a Fast-Changing World
- Developing a Chapter Website

OVERVIEW

Suppose you were starting your chapter from scratch. Would you start by enrolling new members? Drafting bylaws? Holding an organizational meeting? Regardless of what you would do first, odds are that establishing regular channels of communication would be a high priority.

What would it be? What would it say? How frequently would it be sent? Would you seek advertising? How would you measure its effectiveness? These are just a few of the important questions to think about.

In reality, your chapter has probably been in business for some time. But the same questions provide a framework for reviewing the objectives, formats, and content of your chapter's communications.

The goal of this document is to provide you with practical checklists, quick tips, new ideas, and useful resources to help you refine and improve your print (primarily your newsletter) and electronic (primarily your website) communications. Five themes can provide a foundation for your planning.

1. **Integrate Your Newsletter** into Your Overall Communications—While the newsletter is typically a chapter's flagship publication, it is just one channel. Others include your website, electronic newsletter, group e-mails and/or faxes, special mailings, and more. The challenge is to integrate your messages and develop continuity in all communications.
2. **Involve Your Reader**—By definition, communication is a two-way street. Always seek feedback and interaction. Talk to, not at, your reader.
3. **Execute Professionally**—Know the fundamentals of good copywriting, editing, and graphic design. Stay on top of legal, administrative, and budget issues.
4. **Innovate and Adapt**—Keep up with the latest trends in communications and design and the use of new technology tools. Stay in touch with your readers so you know when it's time to refresh your publication or website.
5. **Develop a Chapter Website**—Consider marketing your chapter and serving your members using a website.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS MANAGEMENT

Integrate Your Newsletter into Overall Communications

One way to improve integration is to look for opportunities to cross-reference. For example, if an article in your newsletter relates to an upcoming meeting, you could refer to a special mailing that was sent to promote that program. Or, if you send a group e-mail to members, look for an opportunity to insert a link to your website.

Think of your communications not as stand-alone pieces, but parts of an ongoing conversation with your members. The purpose of the conversation is to share information and ideas and create a sense of community. Keep your message consistent and focused to create a seamless communications program.

A good first step is to set objectives for various communication channels. For instance, ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish with your newsletter. The following are some possible answers:

- Report on news about the profession.
- Report on ASHE news, chapter meetings, and events.
- Announce meetings and encourage attendance.
- Deliver a mail back/fax back registration form.
- Summarize events/meetings.
- Provide updates on local and state codes and standards.
- Call for action on a particular [issue or event](#).
- Provide a means for members to share opinions, test new ideas, and create community.
- Ask for member feedback on an issue.
- Provide information about members.

- Feature new members, those who have passed away (“in memoriam”), and those who have received special awards.
- Seek new members.
- Feature membership services/benefits.
- Provide leads and resources where readers can find more information.
- Generate non-dues revenue (in the form of advertising revenue).
- Provide an opportunity for suppliers to gain visibility.
- Create a buying community with product/service and classified ads.
- Reinforce the purpose and mission of the organization.

What You Should Know About Mission Statements

A written [mission statement](#) for your communications vehicle can help reinforce your commitment to communication goals. Think of your mission statement as a welcoming message and an introduction to your publication. Keep it short and simple. Consider including it in every communication, on your website, in your annual directory, and with each issue of your newsletter.

INVOLVING YOUR READER

Whether it’s an e-mail, an item for the website, or your newsletter, have the reader in mind when you start to write. Ask yourself:

- What does the reader want to know?
- What information can the organization provide that the reader cannot find elsewhere?
- What information does the organization need to share with members?
- How can this communication channel be best used to create a sense of community among the members?

To gain insights into what readers want to know and to involve them, ask for input, article suggestions, and submissions. Be sure to acknowledge any input you receive. Another idea is to randomly select a few members and call them for a brief interview about your newsletter or website.

Every organization should periodically take a readership survey. This can be included as an insert with a particular newsletter issue or sent as a separate mailer. (See the end of this chapter for sample questions.)

The following is a checklist of items to consider in managing the feedback process:

- Whenever possible, report back the results to survey participants.
- Look for feedback from meeting evaluations or from other surveys.
- Post questions on your website.
- For websites: make it easy for visitors to get in touch using “contact us” e-mails.

EXECUTING PROFESSIONALLY

Writing—A Review of Fundamentals

- Be sure your news stories cover the facts. Check for who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Use short sentences—15 to 20 words is a good guideline.
- Use short paragraphs; this visually makes your newsletter more inviting to read.
- Use common language. Avoid unnecessary jargon, technical terms, and academic-sounding language. Spell out acronyms in the first reference.
- Use action verbs and the active voice.
- Assume readers may not read the entire article. Put the most important information at the beginning.

- Vary the length of the articles.
- Incorporate summary boxes in feature articles.
- Use checklists, bulleted lists, and call out quotation boxes to help break up long articles or pages with a lot of type.

How to overcome writer's block

- Start with the headline. Don't try to make it perfect. A working headline will help you focus.
- Dive into your article and plan to go back to it later. As with the headline, don't fret too much about getting your opening sentence or paragraph exactly right in the first draft. No matter how long you spend creating it, odds are that you—or someone else—will edit it later.

Tips on grammar and usage

- Use the grammar checker in your word processor. While neither comprehensive nor foolproof, it's potentially helpful.
- If you don't already have one, select and regularly use a grammar handbook.
- Use a style guide. One of the most popular is the *Associated Press Stylebook*.
- Select a standard dictionary as part of your style guide. One common choice is the *Webster's New World Dictionary*.
- Develop a style guide for your own organization. For example, do you prefer "Annual Meeting" or "Annual Convention?" Decide what words you will hyphenate, capitalize, and the like. Develop standard formats and spellings for jargon and technical terms.
- Avoid sexism in language.
- Consistently work at the finer points of style. For example, know how to properly display service marks and trademarks. Example: Realtor®

Tips on proofreading

Ideally, have three outside proofreaders review your document for these different areas:

- Grammar and language.
- Content accuracy about the profession and your organization.
- Political sensitivity about issues in your profession and organization. This proofreader should have a feel for how an article will be perceived by rank-and-file members, leaders, and other segments of your readership. Look for someone who can spot who or what has been left out as readily as what was mistakenly left in.
- In addition, your review team should include someone with an eye for graphics, photo selection, layout, and overall appearance.

What You Should Know About Graphics

The best rule of thumb is to keep your design simple and readable. Avoid clutter. Strive to have the design reflect who you are as well as to whom you are speaking. A consistent, familiar image is the foundation of a powerful identity.

Tips

- If you don't have access to a desktop publishing system or someone who has experience in design and layout, consider using software templates.

- Learn about typefaces, fonts, and layout techniques.
- Identify common found elements and styles in professionally produced pieces that you can incorporate in your publication.

Resources

If you don't have the resources you need to prepare a newsletter, you may want to consider contacting:

- Universities, community colleges (faculty and/or students)
- Graphic design firms
- Colleagues in ASHE

HOW TO AVOID LEGAL PITFALLS

You should be aware of the following legal pitfalls that could potentially expose your chapter to liability:

- **Libel (injury to reputation):** Insist on accurate and fair reporting.
- **The right to privacy:** Always obtain signed releases before publishing photographs.
- Copyright (the right of authors to control the reproduction and use of their creative expression that have been fixed in tangible form): Secure permission before using materials or artwork from a published source.
- **Antitrust:** This complex body of law prohibits any concerted action that unreasonably restrains competition. Among actions clearly prohibited are: conduct involving horizontal agreements to establish prices and entering agreements to refuse to deal with third parties or to allocate markets or limit production.
- **Advertising:** Put in writing your policy about what you will and will not accept. Use signed contracts for ad space.
- Consider publishing a legal disclaimer in each issue or for your website content.

BUDGET BASICS AND TIPS FOR COMMUNICATIONS

Establish a budget for expenses and revenue prior to publication. The way you produce your newsletter (i.e., two-color vs. one-color, number of pages, etc.) and even the way it's folded for mailing can have major cost implications. Following are some tips for managing expenses and revenue:

- Be innovative. Paper, printing, and technology are always changing. Keep in touch and ask questions of your outside vendors.
- If you need help with postal matters, such as how your newsletter should be folded to incur the least amount of postage, consult the United States Postal Service.
- To generate income, consider periodically running business card listings.
- Mail to advertising prospects several times a year. Announce your ad deadline schedule well in advance.
- If you sell advertising as a regular part of your publication's operation, determine your editorial-advertising ratio. Use the ratio as a guide, not a firm rule.

A CHECKLIST FOR NEWSLETTER PRODUCTION AND PLANNING

The following checklist can help you manage the production and planning aspects of your newsletter:

- Do you have established deadlines and stick to them?
- Do you have a tentative editorial calendar for the year?
- Do you have writing guidelines for authors?
- If your publication has photos and graphics, do you ask authors to contribute?
- Do you put the author's contact information at the end of the article?
- Do you get credit when something in your publication is copied and shared? (Tip: put the page number, date of publication, and name of your publication on every page, so if the page is copied and shared, your organization will get the credit.)
- Do you have a table of contents to highlight what's inside each issue?
- Do you publish an annual index to articles?
- Do you insert a request for updated member contact information with a box including address, phone, and e-mail changes?
- Do you use recycled paper? Some of your members view this as very important. Some organizations use recycled paper but forget to let readers know.

INNOVATING AND ADAPTING IN A FAST-CHANGING WORLD

Following are some suggestions for getting your communications vehicle off the ground and keeping reader interest:

- Develop a formal or informal advisory committee.
- Keep an ongoing idea file containing examples of other newsletters and article ideas.
- Read a variety of publications, including several outside your field. Examples: *Fast Company Magazine* and *Hospitals and Health Networks*.
- Feature a lively and regular president's column.
- Make up a quiz. Invite readers to send in their answers by a certain date. Everyone who gets a certain score can be entered in a drawing for a prize. Print the answers—and winners' names if you offer prizes—in a future issue. Or put them on your website to help build traffic.
- Look for ideas on content (plus layout and graphics) from a variety of resources.
- Focus on fitting and adapting ideas from others, not copying them.
- Consider creating a special issue that can be sent to non-member audiences, such as:
 - Non-members (including former members who have dropped)
 - Retired members
 - Local media

- Opinion leaders including local political leaders, libraries, and universities
- Administrators of health care facilities
- Look before you launch—experiment, test prototypes, and create pilot programs. Gather feedback. Then refine and improve.
- If you are making big changes in the format or frequency of the publication, let your key audiences know. This includes your leadership, readers, and advertisers. Tell them about the benefits of the changes you’re making and ask for their feedback.
- Grocery checkout line magazines often live and die on the power of their front pages to jump off the rack and into the hands of buyers. Whatever style you select for your cover or front page, the goal is to be visually interesting and entice readers.
- Involve readers with quick surveys. Provide instructions and then report the results.

Do’s and Don’ts for E-mail Newsletters

As e-mail volume grows dramatically, electronic newsletters must do more to stand out. Regarding format, weigh the blandness—yet universal ease of use—of plain text against the risk that color, graphics, and design elements could come up as gibberish on systems that do not support HTML mail.

Tips

- When determining frequency, stay tuned to member feedback. For most people, daily is probably annoying unless you offer vital information.
- Avoid indents and long lines. This will cut down on awkward line breaks and will make the web page easier to read.

DEVELOPING A CHAPTER WEBSITE

A complete manual could be written on chapter website development. For the purposes of this section, only the basics will be covered—items you need to consider as a volunteer committee or board.

There are many valid reasons to develop a website for your chapter. Some chapters use their sites solely to publish chapter communications and post upcoming meeting information. Other chapters have embraced their website as a full-fledged membership service. Monetary resources and, more important, resources for maintaining the content on the website, usually dictate the degree of complexity.

Put Your Best Face Forward

Your website showcases your chapter. It may be the first place someone goes when they are seeking information on joining your organization. Make sure it’s user-friendly to both members and non-members. Try to put yourself in the user’s shoes and make it easy for someone to find the information they need.

Organize Your Site

Try to apply the “keep it simple, stupid” or KISS principle. It’s very easy to get carried away when determining what buttons to include on a home page. Everyone will have their own opinion and territorial issues about what should be on the home page and what should not.

Begin by looking at what other chapters and ASHE include on their home page. The Affiliated Chapters section of the ASHE website provides a link to chapter websites, if the chapter has provided a link.

Next, make your list of major buttons and home page contents. Try to narrow your buttons down to no more than seven or eight. Suggested buttons might include:

- About (Your Organization Name)
- Career Opportunities
- Chapter Meetings and Calendar
- Communications
- Membership Information
- Members Only
- Awards
- Links

In addition, you may want to consider including more minor buttons or information (usually located at the top or bottom of the page), such as:

- Search
- Site Map
- Who to Contact
- Date of Last Update
- ASHE Logo and link to the ASHE website with the words “An Affiliated Chapter of the American Society for Healthcare Engineering of the American Hospital Association.”

Following are additional suggestions on content to include on each of these pages.

Suggested “About (Your Organization Name)” Contents

- Vision/Mission
- Subchapters, if any
- Board of Directors
- Committees
- Bylaws
- History
- Affiliation Status with ASHE (Gold, Silver, or Bronze Chapter of ASHE)

Suggested “Chapter Meetings and Calendar” Contents

- Calendar of Meetings
- Meeting Notices
- Meeting Minutes
- PDF of brochure or content related to a major conference
- Provide a link to the educational programs calendar on the ASHE website

Suggested “Communications” Contents

- Letter from the President
- Newsletters
- Alerts
- Announcements

Suggested “Membership Information” Contents

- Who Should Join

- Membership Features and Benefits—features tell the reader what they receive; benefits indicate what your chapter does for them
- Membership Application
- Who to Contact for Membership Questions

Suggested “Members Only” Contents

- Membership Directory
- Bulletin Board
- Job Opportunities in your local area or the latest issue of ASHE Career Flash

Suggested “Awards” Contents

- Awards nomination information and forms
- Announcements regarding award winners, including chapter award winners and ASHE members in your chapter who need to be recognized
- Link to the Certified Healthcare Facility Manager website of the American Hospital Association Certification Center (a link to the Center can be found on www.aha.org)

Suggested Links to Other Organizations

- ASHE website (www.ashe.org)
- Local authorities having jurisdiction
- State/Local hospital association
- The Joint Commission
- American Society of Heating, Refrigerating & Air-Conditioning Engineers
- The National Fire Protection Association
- National Safety Council

Writing Tips for the Web

- Do not assume that what works in print will work equally well on the Web. Posting a document on your website in a PDF format is acceptable. Do not, however, take documents such as brochures that were written and designed as print pieces and post them as is on your website.
- Web users expect brevity. This means Web articles have to be shorter than written copy. Avoid big words, long sentences, and fluff. A rule of thumb is to keep Web articles to half the length of printed pieces.
- Web users skim, click, and move on. To help them, use lots of subheads and bulleted lists.
- Whenever possible, provide hyperlinks.
- While the Web is different from print, copyright law is the same for both. For example, you cannot simply paste someone else’s text or graphics on your website without permission.
- Contact ASHE if you wish to post copyrighted ASHE material (non-marketing materials) on your website. In most cases there should be no objection, as long as ASHE is given full credit.

Determine Site Development/Administration Responsibilities

Your first decision will be determining who will design and host your site.

- Does anyone in your chapter have an interest in website design?
- Is there a university or college nearby that teaches website design? Students may be looking for an opportunity to add to their design portfolio.

- Is there a local or nationally based web design (and sometimes hosting) service you might use?
- Find out how other chapters designed their site and where their site is hosted.

Make careful decisions in this area. If your website designer or expert leaves or moves, you may be in trouble. With a service provider, you may have more staying power.

Next, determine who will be responsible for updating your site. Can you update it yourself, or do you need to work with your web host or designer? It's highly recommended that your site be updated at least monthly.

Budgeting Basics and Tips for a Website

Expenses

The cost of developing and maintaining your website will vary greatly depending on factors including design complexity, kind of content (e.g., bulletin boards require more programming than text-only content), and the amount of content to be maintained. A page that offers the user interactivity demands a greater amount of programming and will be more expensive. Photos and graphics also add costs.

Items that may need to be budgeted include the following:

- Design
- Encryption (if you wish to conduct e-commerce using credit cards)
- Hosting
- Maintenance contract
- Special programming, if required
- Domain registration—Don't be overcharged. Many companies advertise low prices but then charge extra for critical add-ons. In many cases, these add-ons cost more than your initial name.

Income

Don't forget about the opportunity to generate income, either by offering sponsorship or online advertising space or by selling listings in an online directory of buyers. Be prepared, however, to deliver traffic to your site. Online advertisers and sponsors will want information on site traffic to justify their expense.

The way website advertising generally operates is that the advertiser will place a small banner advertisement on your site and will pay you either by click-through, impression, sale, or some combination of the three. A click-through occurs when a visitor to your site clicks on the advertising banner and is taken to the advertiser's site.

Tips on Design and Graphics

- Try to keep any images under 40 kb, or your members may not be able to quickly download your website.
- Be consistent in the use of fonts for headlines and text. Don't use too many different fonts.
- Don't make a single page too long. Users won't want to scroll down too far. Make liberal use of links and sub-pages.

Launching Your Site

A soft launch of your website will allow you to test links and make sure all pages load correctly. At this point, the site will only be available for your eyes or the eyes of volunteers (i.e., board or committee) responsible for directing its development.

Once you are ready for the official launch, make sure your members anticipate it and promote traffic through e-mail messages with a link to the site. You will also want to include your URL on all your brochures, business cards, newsletters, and program announcements.

Gathering Feedback

To keep your site from becoming stagnant and to increase traffic to your website, periodically gather feedback from your membership on its value, satisfaction, and reliability.

Membership feedback can be accomplished in several ways, including through membership surveys, online surveys, and a feedback button on the home page of your website.

It's also helpful to test drive the site with the following thoughts in mind:

- How easy is it to use, navigate, and search?
- How simple is it to contact your organization with questions?
- Do you post your e-mail address, phone, fax, and mailing address?
- Do you keep your website fresh and interesting?
- Does what's new on your site jump out to visitors?
- Is it interactive—in other words, do you ask for feedback, opinions, and sharing of ideas and information?
- Are pages easy to print?
- Do the hyperlinks work? They might have been fine the day you added them, but the Web is dynamic, and sites change and disappear every day.