State Affiliate News

Marketing to Members Through E-Mail and Word of Mouth

A continuing challenge for state affiliates is how to cost effectively market services and benefits to current and prospective members. E-mail and word-of-mouth marketing can deliver customized communications directly to computer screens. Several state and regional societies already have achieved the fine balance of providing relevant information without inundating members' inboxes. And they are not alone. More than 63% of companies found e-mail marketing the most cost-effective method for customer retention, according to the Direct Marketing Association (New York, NY). This article offers examples of how state affiliates have successfully kept members informed of oncology-related issues and events. In addition, two experts offer specific tips on ways to most effectively distribute priority messages through e-mail and word of mouth.

Establish Two-Way Communications to Build Trust

A premier advantage for every state affiliate is to develop two-way communications between the organization and membership. "We are concerned with members needs. We have an active membership and want to make sure we solicit feedback to stay current with their needs," says Dorothy Green Phillips, Florida Society of Clinical Oncology (FLASCO; Tampa, FL) executive director. "Membership feedback allows us to constantly evaluate how our message, products, and services can better serve the oncology community."

For example, each year FLASCO asks its members for their preferred methods of communication. To date, members have responded that they want to receive information via weekly fax blast. Green says the preference for faxes versus e-mail notifications reflects the age group of members. It is important to know one's audience, she adds. FLASCO members have said these weekly fax blasts are one of the most valued benefits of membership.

Personalize the Message With Key Words

Given that you already know your audience, it is most effective to use a personalized message, says Terry Hamlin, senior manager, State Affiliate Program at ASCO. This is particularly true in recruitment efforts, as people are most likely to join an organization that knows what they value. To translate these values into communications, be sure to use key phrases in e-mails that will catch the reader's attention. For example, in the oncology management realm, "electronic health records" (EHRs), "practice efficiencies," and "reimbursement" are buzz words that will engage the reader.

Balance Information Overload and Frequency

The Northern New England Clinical Oncology Society has used e-mail newsletters and meeting notification e-blasts to market its society to its 200 members as well as potential members, says Lori Aubrey, executive director. "It is really important to try to remain visible to our region of oncology professionals." Aubrey says her marketing message stresses that "we are more than two

educational meetings. We are a strong voice for our region. Members need to see value in regional society membership. We are always looking for ways to maximize relationships with members. It is a delicate balance; you want to be careful not to be overwhelming and keep relevant," she says. One quarterly e-mail provides a link to the e-newsletter on the Web site, which posts information on board initiatives, news, and information. Periodic e-blasts focus on a link to a members' forum, providing information on policy changes, resources, and educational opportunities. Member feedback has been positive and effective, as demonstrated in an increase in hits on the Web site, she notes.

Tips for Using Effective E-mail

E-mail is a cost-effective and easily customizable way to retain and recruit members. Kara Trivunovic, founder and principal of theemailadvisor.com, provides the following tips:

Send an inviting welcome message. Make sure you send the message in HTML, indicating what your message will look like and its expected frequency.

Keep the message scannable, succinct, and to the point. Recipients do not actually read e-mail, they scan it—so keep the message simple. Use bullets to highlight specific content. Promotional communications should be limited to one to two screens, and newsletters should require scrolling through no more than four or five screens.

Define a consistent look. Use templates for easy organization and reading. Maintain the design to reinforce consistency.

Treat the "Golden Rectangle" with respect. The Golden Rectangle, defined as the uppermost 250 pixels of the e-mail, should include preheader offer or summary, logo, headline, call to action, unsubscribe link, navigation to the site, and a table of contents.

Place paid advertising appropriately. While advertisers expect to be seen, do not let ads intrude on your message. You can place advertising in a left or right rail, in the message footer, or horizontally within the body copy outside of the uppermost 250 pixels of the message.

The Northern New England Clinical Oncology Society also uses word-of-mouth marketing and networking primarily through board members and industry supporters, such as pharmaceutical companies. The board members may directly contact new physicians, nurses, or practice managers who come into the region. Pharmaceutical representatives value the relationship with the organization and are more than willing to tell others that the society provides an important opportunity for the oncology community, she adds.

Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Word-of-mouth marketing is all things you do to get other people talking about you, explains Andy Sernovitz, author of *Word of Mouth Marketing: How Smart Companies Get People Talking* (Kaplan, 2006). Just because your membership is satisfied doesn't mean they are spreading the word to colleagues. Affiliates should make it easier for a conversation about the organization to take place.

Give them something to talk about. Provide members with articles, white papers, or video announcements that might provide “aha” moments. It is one thing to talk about a featured speaker at the annual meeting, but there is more impact if you provide a 3-minute preview video on YouTube that can be forwarded to colleagues.

Make it easier to share. Steer members to share information from your Web site via YouTube, Facebook, e-mails, or PDF files.

Make it exclusive. Offer advance reviews of an article before it hits the public domain. If some members get a VIP update a week early, they are likely to share the information.

Let them talk about themselves. Be sure to feature members in published interviews to be included on a Web site or blog. They will forward it to everyone they know.

Combine all of the above. Ego is a strong motivator. Make your communications about the members and experts. For example, use information presented at a conference to bring attention to an expert of the week.

Content Is King

Mary Jo Wichers, executive director of state affiliates in Oklahoma, Utah, and Louisiana, is not concerned about sending out e-mails several times a week as long as the content is noteworthy. E-mail blasts focus on legislative matters, meeting notifications, new drug updates, new indications, or something that made the front page of that day's *Wall Street Journal*, she explains. Members can link to the Web site for additional information. Members have responded positively to the frequency of communications.

In fact, she says that when she is on vacation, members take notice of the absence of e-mails.

It is critical to accurately describe the content of the e-mail in the headline. Then, members can decide quickly to read or delete, she advises. E-mail copy should get directly to the point or link so the material can be scanned quickly.

Track Results and Adjust As Needed

It is easy to measure results of e-mail marketing by tracking the level of responses, says Nancy Elmahdy, marketing manager, Marketing, Licensing, and Sales Department at ASCO. For example, ASCO has been able to measure how many recipients opened an e-mail and clicked a link to an article, and how long they stayed on a page. “That tells us if an e-mail has been helpful in a range of ways from providing information to registering for a conference,” she explains.

Elmahdy recommends measuring the success of the e-mail marketing during the first week. “Then you know if the message is working or you need to reposition the message to get a better response.”

Is Social Networking the Future of Marketing?

To date, ASCO has found that topic-specific marketing works well on social networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn. “We realize social networking sites are marketing tools,” says Elmahdy. For example, ASCO set up a Facebook group where you can “Become a Fan.” ASCO has also created its own social networking site specifically for the topic of EHRs. The goal is for physicians, practice administrators, state affiliate members, nurses, and vendors to have an open discussion on the perceived drawbacks and value of EHRs. “There is real powerful potential to have a marketplace of ideas to see what others are thinking,” she says. So far, approximately 500 members are blogging and posting articles, sharing information for the education of the entire community. ASCO plans to Twitter during the annual meeting and the ASCO Cancer Foundation has set up a LinkedIn group for grant and award alumni. “It's just another way to better reach our membership,” she adds.

DOI: 10.1200/JOP.0945002

PURCHASE 2009 GASTROINTESTINAL CANCERS SYMPOSIUM PRODUCTS

Missed the symposium? Educational materials are still available by purchasing the 2009 Gastrointestinal Cancers Symposium Podcast, Virtual Meeting, and Proceedings now! For more details and pricing information, visit www.gicasymposium.org.