Chapter Communications

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Chapter Communications

Chapter leaders rely on communication strategies and tools to fulfill the mission of their organization. Communications serve to educate, engage and mobilize chapter members, potential members and the public. Choosing the appropriate media for your message is key to assuring your audience receives and is able to comprehend the message. Most chapters rely on hardcopy newsletters, electronic newsletters, blast emails and information published on a Web site. Cost of production and distribution, the urgency of delivering the message and knowing the communications preferences of chapter members or the public are all factors that will help chapter leaders choose the most effective communications media.

Routine Communications

Generally, there are two types of routine communications; those that serve to periodically provide information to members and those that fulfill requirements established by the bylaws.

Informational Communications

These are typically newsletters that update members on the work of the chapter. Many chapters choose to publish informational communications on a predictable schedule: semi-annually, quarterly or monthly.

Meeting and Election Communications

The bylaws of most chapters specify the timeframe in which members must be notified of upcoming chapter business meetings and elections. Some bylaws may also specify the media. For example, it may be a requirement that chapter members receive notification in hardcopy in the mail. In most cases is possible to combine these notifications with other communications.

Creating a Communications Calendar

It can be helpful for chapter leaders to establish a communications calendar. A communications calendar can:

- specify the nature of the message to be sent (i.e. an elections notice or reminder to pay membership dues)
- specify the media for the communication
- specify who is responsible for creating the communication
- specify a deadline for content
- specify a deadline for distribution

Emergency Communications

Not all chapter communications can be predicted. Sometimes members need to be notified of new developments in the chapter. Such developments might include:

- unexpected changes in the chapter's leadership or administration
- an emergent issue affecting the profession
- a call to the membership for action

Legislative Action Alerts

Pending legislative actions are a common cause for emergency chapter communications. Typically information needs to go out quickly. Many chapters rely on email.

When sending out a legislative action alert it is helpful to include the following:

- A brief overview of the issue
- A brief explanation for how this impacts the profession

- A specific call to action (What do you want members to do with this information?)
- Guidelines for action (What is the timeframe in which you want members to act? Are there talking points?, etc.)
- A person to contact for more information

Developing a Chapter Newsletter

Many chapters rely on a hardcopy newsletter for communications with members. This section provides suggestions for the development and production of a newsletter. Also included are words of wisdom from a chapter newsletter editor as well as samples of some chapter newsletters.

Communications Committee

Allowing the responsibility of developing and distributing chapter newsletters to fall on the shoulders of one chapter leader can be over-whelming. Some chapters find it helpful to organize a committee to distribute the work.

A communications committee might include the following:

- Editor / Chair – This person is responsible for overseeing the work of the committee. He or she should organize planning meetings of the committee, identify production and distribution deadlines and communicate with committee members to assure adherence to the timeline. He or she should editorial oversight of the newsletter and, if applicable the Web site, and work with the chapter's officers to assure the newsletter contains appropriate and timely content.
- Content Developer(s) – This person, or people, is responsible for identifying and creating content for the newsletter. Some chapters may chose to assign a specific area to each person. For example, one person might follow government relations issues while another tracks human interest stories about chapter members.
- Production Manager – This person works with the editor to publish the newsletter. Responsibilities may include word processing, working with a printing facility, collecting mailing labels from the ACR and assuring the timely mailing of the newsletter.
- Web Content Manager – This person is responsible for acquiring and preparing content for the chapter's Web site.

Your chapter should decide what type of communications will work best given the available resources and communications needs.

Content Ideas

The following list highlights events and resources that might contribute valuable content to a chapter newsletter.

- Chapter business meeting minutes
- Reports from chapter leaders or committee chairs
- Chapter educational meetings
- Chapter social events

- Member accomplishments (ACR Fellowship, professional achievements, personal achievements, etc.)
- ACR meetings, events or publications
- Chapter consultants (lobbyists, lawyers, accountants, etc.)
- State legislative or regulatory activities or publications
- Federal legislative or regulatory activities or publications
- State medical society activities or publications

Production and Distribution

The layout and materials for your newsletter do not have to be elaborate. When choosing a layout, keep the readability of the document a high priority. If you have the talent and resources, you may be able to rely on staff or volunteers to produce the newsletter. You may also consider working with a local printer.

You may request mailing labels or an electronic file of members' mailing information from the ACR. See Services Available from the ACR in the ACR and it's Chapters section of this handbook.

Words of Wisdom from a Chapter Newsletter Editor

Below are some thoughts and advice from Dave Desrochers, MD FACR, Editor of the North Carolina Radiological Society's newsletter. He shared this information during the 2005 ACR Chapter Leaders' Workshop.

Introduction:

This is my 5th year as editor for the NCRS newsletter which is my first attempt at journalism. It has been a pleasure, and I have learned to appreciate the mailings we receive from various organizations such as clubs, churches, nature conservancy groups, etc. Through the newsletter, I hope I have improved communication in the Society and have provided a dependable information source about the events and the issues affecting the Society at the state level. The following is a guide on how to start your own society newsletter. Once you have published your first issue, it becomes a routine, pleasant, and rewarding task.

Getting Started:

- Find a local printer who is experienced in publishing newsletters
  - Ask to see examples of his/her work. The printer should have the knowledge and patience to work with you on the layout and the editing. The printer should have a creative bent to help a novice editor make an attractive and appealing product.
  - You should be able to communicate via e-mail for text, photos, and final drafts. Contributing articles can be e-mailed to you and you can forward them to your editor.
  - The ACR can send your printer the electronic addresses for your membership (no more stick-on labels). Postage can be added by the printer, as well. You won't have to handle a single newsletter, except your own copy, when it comes in the mail!
  - Have your printer send the itemized charges directly to your society treasurer.

- Avoid being a middle-man!
- Formatting
- Don't be cheap. Use good paper and colors. No staples! Use tabs instead.
- The format of your newsletter will not change much with each issue.
  - Our printer folds a single sheet of 22" x 8 ½" in half, yielding four sides of 11" x 8 ½" papers, and that is plenty of space for a busy chapter. You will have lean issues and fat issues.
  - Your printer can expand or contract print size to accommodate text volume (remember triple spacing in college?).
  - The title page and other headings will remain the same, so it becomes a fill-in-the-blank for the editor as you plan your next issue.
  - NCRS has a front page lead article, a page two with articles, political updates, awards, fellowships, etc., and a page three for meetings update. Then of course there's the best part of all, your editorial column. A photo page is nice after a meeting to add faces to the leadership names. This is always a nice touch and good for morale.

Editor's Responsibility:

- The editor gathers information by attending all Society meetings, the National ACR meeting in DC, reading the ACR publications and communicating with state officials, lobbyists, and of course, keeping abreast of the state Medical Society.
- As an example, the NCRS has stayed involved in the CON controversy and the malpractice crisis. I have tried to keep the membership informed by staying in touch with all the major players at the state level and reporting back to them both in factual articles and in opinions rendered in the editorial section.
- For another example, in recent years the floor of the national ACR meetings has been the scene of exciting debate on hot -button topics such as Guidelines and Standards. The quality of the debate was excellent and I enjoyed the “bad boys” from the Dixie Caucus, especially from Georgia. I reported on the debate itself, and then editorialized about how a grassroots campaign had changed the course of the College.
- The editor keeps track of the events calendar and attempts to publish it a year in advance. This allows the membership to mark their calendars and have a reliable reference site to find this information. I also use the newsletter as a way to advertise our society and educational meetings.
- Annually, I print the roster of officers, councilors and alternate councilors.

Page 4:

Page 4 is probably the most informative ½ page and it sits behind the folded address page. Here is the list of up-coming events, the list of chapter officers, new fellows, and the address, telephone #, and e-mail of the executive director and the editor.

Center Fold:

Not really! When I come across an interesting subject, I'll add a single 11" x 8 ½" center page (for a total of 6 sides).

Recently, a radiologist friend lived in Canada. I asked him to get the straight story on the practice of radiology there. His article was excellent. A young German surgeon in our town

wrote about the practice of medicine, surgery and radiology in Germany. Again, it was a very interesting subject. You will find that many people will be willing to write articles for you.

Costs:

Costs are under $2.00 per copy including postage. Our members prefer print newsletters over electronic. With active members, retirees, residents and mailings to special people (state and national politicians, etc.) we print 1200 copies per issue and 3 issues per year. Total budget is approximately $7500.

Helpful Hints & Lessons Learned:

- Keep after your officers to write articles. Our lobbyist has been very prolific.
- Always get a departing president's letter to the membership. Put his photo next to it for good measure!
- Once you get your newsletter started and reduce the task to a fill-in-the-blank exercise, it becomes easy and pleasurable. It is something you can do on your laptop during lulls at work. It may not be a "front office" job for your society, but it is a fulfilling way to serve by laboring quietly in the vineyards, and by contributing something completely your own on the editorial page.

Chapter Web Page

Many people first turn to the Web when looking for information about professional organizations. The Web can be a cost-effective and simple way for your chapter to communicate with members, potential members and the public. If poorly maintained, however, a chapter Web site can quickly give people a poor impression of the organization. For this reason, it is important to establish realistic and actionable expectations if you plan to maintain a chapter Web site. This section provides recommendations for chapter Web content and tips for developing and maintaining a successful Web presence.

Checklist for Recommended Web Page Content

Less can be more when it comes to outlining content for a Web page. It may be helpful to keep in mind that if a person has access to a chapter Web site, they probably also have access to the entire Web and all of the resources it has to offer. For that reason, it is not important to make your chapter's page a one-stop-shop all information your members might be interested in. Rather, focus on publishing the information that only your chapter can.

The following is a list of possible content for a chapter Web site:

- Mission statement
- Listing of current officers, committee chairs, councilors and alternate councilors (this listing might include contact information)
- Information on upcoming meetings or events (include the name of the event, date, time, location and who to contact for registration or additional information)
- Information for how to become a member

- Electronic copies of chapter newsletters, other communication and meeting minutes (This may not be content you want non-members to have access to.)
- Links to related organizations

How to Develop a Web Page

There several paths to consider if you want to create a Web presence for your chapter. This section addresses the issues of technology, organizing and preparing content and collecting feedback from users to gauge the usability and usefulness of the site.

Finding the Right Technology

There are two critical elements for having a Web site: 1) establishing a domain name and 2) having a server to host the site. You can achieve both of these things in-house or you can out-source them. Unless you have a staff member or volunteer who is savvy in the ways of Web site development and hosting, you should seriously consider out-sourcing the work of establishing and hosting your site. There are many organizations that provide these services. You can find them by searching the Internet or talking with local organizations that have Web sites.

Please consider the Web hosting service provided by the ACR. This service is available for chapters at a competitive rate. More information about this service is available on the ACR Web site or by contacting staff in the ACR Office of Chapter and Volunteer Development at either chapters@acr.org or (800) 227-5463 x. 4917.

Organizing Content

Before you begin organizing content on your site, take some time to look at the navigation and content organization of other Web sites. As you do your research, consider the following:

• What makes a Web site easy for you to use?

• What makes a Web site easy for you to read?

• What strategies to you prefer to use when looking for content on a Web site?

• What things deter you from returning to some Web sites?

• What impact do images have on your browsing experience?

• Can you identify 1-2 Web sites whose navigation and content layout you'd most like to emulate?

Based on your research, create an outline for your Web site's content and navigation. It is important to keep in mind the abilities and limitations of your Web developer, publishing software, server space and budget as you outline your site.

At this stage, before you've possibly paid someone hundreds of dollars to develop your site, it is a good idea to ask others for feedback on the content layout and navigation plan.

Preparing Content

Once you have an acceptable outline for your content and a map for navigation, it is time to prepare your content. Depending on how you plan to bring your content to the Web, this may mean simply typing up the content and sending it to a Web developer or using software or HTML know-how to prepare the content in-house.

Solicit Feedback

Before going live with the site, solicit people to look at the site. You might consider creating a scavenger hunt for people to look for information on the site. In addition to finding out if they were able to find the information; you might consider inquiring about their experience of searching and maneuvering through the site. Keep in mind you will not be able to please everyone with your site. Some people will have strong feelings about colors and page layout, navigation and content. Keep your goal in mind as you receive feedback and make sure changes you make work toward helping you reach that goal.

How to Maintain a Web Page

Before you launch your Web site, it is important to have a plan in place for how you are going to maintain the accuracy and timeliness of the content. It is hard to trust organizations that publish false or out-of-date information. Below are some suggestions for developing and executing a maintenance plan for your Web site.

Establish Realistic Expectations

Identify and agree on realistic expectations maintaining the Web site. Begin by assessing the resources you have for maintaining the site. If you are using volunteers to program the site, how many hours are they available to work on the site? If you are out-sourcing the programming, how much money do you have to spend on changes each month or annually? Based on your resources, identify what areas of the Web site will need updating and when the changes will need to be made. Make sure the changes you expect to make or the additional content you would like to add fit with your available resources. Make sure others, chapter officers and, if applicable, members of the communications committee, understand the options you have for making changes and additions to the Web site.

It is helpful to develop and communicate a process for submitting changes or new content to the Web site. Issues to consider include:

- What format does content need to be in (Word, text file, .pdf)?
- Who should new or edited content be sent to?
- Who is responsible for editorial review of the content before it is submitted for publication to the Web?
- Who is responsible for publishing the content to the Web?
- What is a reasonable timeframe for changes and additions being made?
- If applicable, what is the fee for making changes or additions?

Finally, it is important to establish a regular review of the site. The frequency of such a review will depend on the amount and nature of the site's content.

Put Someone in Charge

It is important to identify someone in the chapter to be responsible for the Web site. This should oversee the administration of the site, the content and the processes for editing and reviewing the site. If you have one, this person should be a member of your chapter's communications committee.

Samples of Chapter Web Pages

The ACR Web site maintains a list of links to ACR Chapter Web pages.

Chapter Information