Too Much Technology

Are your tech-tools alienating members?

Joanne L. Smikle

Technologists would have you believe that the latest gadgets and services enable you to accomplish more, faster, better. But could over-emphasis and over-reliance on technology impede association executives' effectiveness? Although communication is certainly faster and cheaper since the advent of e-mail, there are still times when members may say "enough already!"

Often association staff don't realize that they have become too reliant on electronic communication until members ask to be taken off distribution lists. Martin Lee, CEO of the Iowa Association of REALTORS®, says that his busy members don't want to sift through too much e-mail. "When we get member requests to be taken off of distribution lists, we know we have relied too heavily on e-mail."

AEs don't have to wait until the complaints start rolling in, however, to rethink their use of e-mail and other forms of technology. Hoyt Suppes, EVP of the Nevada Association of REALTORS®, warns that when AEs have not left the office in a while or have not actually spoken with members in recent memory, they could be relying too heavily on technology. He emphasizes that personal visits to brokerages, telephone chats with members, and other face-to-face contacts are crucial interactions, vital to the success of associations.

When deciding how much e-mail is enough to connect with and serve your membership, ask yourself:

- Are we sending the right information to the right people?
- Is the message succinct enough to be read quickly?
- Is this information valuable?
- Is this the best way to deliver this message?
- Will this information help the member be more successful?

If you answered 'no' to some of these questions, reconsider your use of e-mail. You may be overdoing it.

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Reviving the human touch

When you do need to communicate electronically with members, you can make those communications personable despite the remote quality of e-mail, teleconferencing, and videoconferencing. For example, start all e-mails with a greeting ("Dear Member"); even better, invest in software that automatically enters the recipient's first name into the greeting ("Dear Jim"). Close e-mails as you would a letter, using "Best Regards" or "Sincerely."

Voice-mail hell

Another strategy for keeping the human touch alive in electronic communication is simply to make sure that your phone system is answered by people rather than by an endless loop of voice-mail recordings. AE Noelle Adams, of the Paradise Association of REALTORS®, Calif., makes sure live people answer phones during business hours. "Members appreciate it," she says. And this simple policy increases the personal connection between her members and their association.

Paper vs. e-mail

Although associations have made excellent use of a variety of technological tools from distance learning to downloadable forms, there are still items that members prefer to receive in traditional formats. The association newsletter is the prime example. Lee says that while his members will read the newsletter in its print format, they are less apt to read an electronic version. It's hard-er on the eyes and requires members to sit in front of a computer and scroll to read it. A creative approach is to include on your Web site PDFs (or Portable Document Formats) which can be easily printed out without losing the easy-to-read format of the newsletter. This way you save on mailing and printing costs while giving those with a preference for the tangible newsletter a chance to print it out.

Urban vs. rural technology use

Another point to consider is matching the electronic tools you use to your unique member population. The technology that's popular in major metropolitan centers may not fly in less densely populated areas. For example, in cities where high-speed Internet connections are widely available, members may more readily accept e-mail newsletters and more frequent and lengthy electronic correspondence, including photos and hyperlinks. In areas where Internet access in limited, keep your use of e-mail to a minimum. Keep track of what percent of your members have e-mail and conduct frequent surveys to ask for e-mail address updates and usage statistics such as how many times a day members check their e-mail. This will help you grow your electronic communications program at the same rate that your members adopt the technology.

It's easy to get swept up by the enormous advantages technology offers the REALTOR® association today. Even with all of the benefits, it is important to use technology thoughtfully and strategically. Pay attention to responses that you get from members—or the lack thereof. Be sure that you're not just using the latest and the greatest innovation simply because you can. [RAE]

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