

Creating Compelling Member Communications

BY LAURA LANDWIRTH CAE

Our members appreciate our lobbying, but they love our communications. In survey after survey, our 175 provider members tell us they are just too busy to keep up with all the senior care and assisted living news. They need someone to give them the highlights, and they are profoundly grateful to us for doing just that.

What does it take to deliver excellence in communications? We've found that the first step is understanding what assisted living executives want to know about. Not surprisingly, they are looking to hear about business trends and fresh ideas within assisted living. But that turns out to be only the beginning. They are just as eager to hear about developments in related areas of senior care, the whole continuum of senior housing and aging services.

No business wants to operate in a vacuum: Assisted living is part of an overall strategy for caring for someone who can't live alone or who needs some assistance. Development in other areas of care can have a profound impact on present and future trends in assisted living. New trends may first appear in other areas before reaching the assisted living world. Our members are eager to follow that news, albeit in a concise and consolidated form.

They want policy information as well. This means more than a running tally of legislative changes at the national level. They want to know about state issues that may have an impact on residents and providers. In Colorado, for instance, we have had a severe budget deficit for



the past three years. Services have been cut, Medicaid rates frozen. If new legislation cannot improve the situation soon, the shortfall will have a direct impact on funding for long-term care services. Our members want to be kept up to date on such issues, even though these issues may not touch directly on questions of aging.

FINDING THE NEWS

We have found a number of successful avenues for bringing together current and relevant information. It starts with ALFA's efforts to keep us up to date with activities at the national level, while at the state level our own lobbyists flag potentially significant bills.

The heavy lifting is done by Holloway & Hyde, a local public relations firm retained by CAHSA to engage in various activities. The firm conducts ongoing media searches

and works with wire services and press-clipping services to gather together a broad range of news items touching on different aspects of senior care.

CAHSA mines non-profit industry news sources and business publications looking for broad business trends that could potentially be reflected in assisted living. It's especially helpful to gather information from diverse sources, from lobbyists to PR firms to executives from among our membership. Each brings a unique point of view, a unique set of interests to the search. When all their findings come together, the result is a broad and deep accumulation of information.

SPREADING THE WORD

It takes a range of highly specific tools to get this information into the hands of members in a way they can really use.

Our basic mode of communication is the monthly newsletter, *CAHSA Connecting*, a fairly substantial 10- to 12-page newsletter. Members may opt to receive a hard copy in the mail or even by fax, but they are just as likely to access the content via e-mail or online. Members are given their choice, whichever is most convenient to their needs. In addition to industry news and issues, the newsletter also includes a member spotlight, "Issues on Leadership," and a column on architectural and design issues, "Design Matters," usually written by a local architect who is a member of the association. The newsletter includes pictures of members whenever possible, in order to

help foster a sense of community and connectivity among members.

The newsletter is just the starting point. During the five months that the state legislature is in session, CASHA puts out a weekly "Capital Focus," a one-pager alerting members to bills in progress and highlighting the association's testimony on diverse topics. "Capital Focus" not only keeps members informed about the issues, but also helps remind them of the value delivered by the association.

When the lawmakers go home, we put out "Week's Wirth," a one-page weekly update highlighting our activities for the past week and plans for the upcoming week-an update requested by readers.

In building a successful communications regimen, we have learned that it is not enough just to say something once. Sometimes we can put out a message mutiple times in different formats and yet some of our most active members still will indicate that they never heard about the issue. It's become increasingly clear that given people's busy schedules, combined with the overload of information flowing their way every day, repetition is a key to success.

You may feel like you are over-communicating. You aren't. We have learned that when it comes to important information about ideas and activities, you can never say something too many times.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Prior to engaging a public relations firm three years ago, CAHSA had no ongoing communications plan, no systemic way to share trends, news, and updates with members beyond the monthly newsletter, which was produced in-house.

It was a board retreat that set things in motion, with association leaders agreeing on the need to increase communications in order to highlight members' activities while making the association a central source of information on senior housing and aging issues.

Having made the effort to put in place a rather elaborate and comprehensive communications strategy, it seems fair to ask: Has it been worth it? Yes. Not only does CAHSA provide a service to members. the association also wins their continued loyalty.

We get feedback all the time, solicited and unsolicited, from members who tell us that our communications add greatly to their professional capabilities. It isn't always easy to know what members want or what services rate high in their

eyes. One thing we know for sure: They want to be informed. They want to know what is going on in the world of senior care and they want a trusted partner to gather and sift all that information, to give it to them in a manner that is concise, compelling, and comprehensive.



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