

Student membership - UK CASE STUDY

Background

- The UK is the largest chapter in the EMENA region with close to 300 members. It's based in London, which is the most prolific in terms of economic output, concentration of international companies and communications professionals. However it's important to us that the chapter is able to meet the needs of members across the country.
- Today the UK is a prosperous chapter, which is gradually expanding its reach across the north and the west of the UK. But it has not always been this way.
- Membership numbers had been dwindling in recent years, with less corporate funding available for training and professional development, as well as competition from groups such as CIPR, IoC, CIM and PRCA.
- The chapter has not traditionally had many student members, and in July 2014, IABC UK's membership was weighted towards a large proportion of mid-senior level communicators who were not fully engaged with the chapter.
- Despite IABC's reputation for excellent professional development events and productive network opportunities, there was a pressing need for the UK to evolve its offering in order to attract and retain members.

Opportunities

- We identified several opportunities around growing student membership in the UK chapter.
- 2.3 million people were enrolled in the UK's 163 universities in 2013-2014 (including full-time, part-time, further education, undergraduate, and postgraduate students).¹
- Most universities in the UK have some form of public relations, communications, marketing or media studies programme.
- Students' priorities around getting a job after graduation align with IABC's core products – including an interest in networking, events and professional development opportunities such as mentoring.
- Since 2011, IABC UK's Mentoring Programme has matched experienced communicators with members who have recently started their career, and this has proved successful. Discussions with university lecturers found that there was a big gap for this sort of support for students wanting to explore their career options and build their network before completing their studies.
- In conversations with academic institutions, we found that the global connections IABC offers are a potential value-add when targeting foreign students, particular given that non-EU students are the most profitable market segment for them.
- The chapter had already given presentations at the University of the Arts, London and the London College of Communications which were well received and gained the chapter a number of new individual student members, as well as corporate membership with faculty. Because of that, we knew that what we were offering would appeal to students and lecturers at other institutions also.

¹ Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013-2014.

Challenges

- So lots of opportunities – but what sort of challenges come with this particular target market?
- The UK chapter had to overcome several challenges with this strategy.
- Figuring out how to make the registration process as easy as possible for the universities to register large groups of students in bulk, in collaboration with IABC head office.
- Unfortunately a delay in the membership process was caused by the migration of IABC's MMS system, so students from both Bournemouth and London College of Communication were signed up as IABC members only a short time before they graduated. This meant that there was limited opportunity to further promote the service to them and they initially failed to engage in the programme.
- Students have plenty of extracurricular activities vying for their attention, so they need to be shown what IABC can do for them rather than just told.
- Ensuring students see enough value from their IABC membership to not let their memberships expire on graduation, and pay the transitional rate after they finish their degree.
- The main challenge was engaging students in the long-term once they'd been registered by their schools.

Objectives

- We set some practical objectives as we began our student programme:
 - To give presentations about the benefits of IABC UK membership to a minimum of two educational institutions by 31st July 2015.
 - To develop at least one partnership with a university communications programme by 31st July 2015.
 - To increase IABC UK's member base by 25 per cent by 31st July 2015.

Strategy and tactics

- Our strategy has progressed significantly through basically trial and error.
- For our pilot programme, we started by developing a partnership with one university at a time – by the third university we were in a much better place and had streamlined our approach, timing and offering.
- I think we learned a lot through this process and the student members we're now recruiting have a longer-term plan in place to make the most of their membership.
- Strategy:
 - Legwork to get started
 - Targeted contacts at universities and developed relationships with communications faculty and lecturers so they would lobby the universities to pay for each student's membership.
 - The small cost of student membership helped facilitate this, as our value proposition was well targeted and fit the needs of the universities, so it wasn't a hard sell.
 - This led into partnerships with Bournemouth University, University of Leeds and the London College of Communication, who each paid for one class of students to join initially. If they deem the pilots a success we will be able to register a broader stream of students.
 - Worked with IABC head office to streamline the application process for student members from partner universities so it's not as cumbersome for them. The university can now register a list of students on their behalf, just

- by providing names and contact information, instead of each student having to fill out an individual form.
 - We launched the partnerships in the universities by giving presentations to classes on the benefits of IABC student membership and tried to make it as easy as possible for them to participate and engage in chapter activities.
 - Focused on trying to get as many students as possible to attend events and see the value that IABC can bring first-hand.
 - Our chapter has traditionally been strong with events, and we find we have the most membership conversion when non-members attend events.
- Add value for both faculty & students
 - For faculty
 - Conduct primary research on this particular target audience's needs, and tailor proposals for the universities to suit.
 - Focus on promoting IABC UK's Mentoring Programme as the top priority, as well as the promise of bespoke events and guest lecturing opportunities for students.
 - Faculty – who often have responsibilities around student mentoring - are often overstretched and this is a really useful area for them to have extra support with.
 - Conduct regular catch-up calls with our main lecturer contacts to plan and determine key priorities.
 - For students:
 - Create student representative and subcommittee positions on the Board, to:
 - 1) Act as a liaison between the chapter and universities and integrate some enthusiastic students into the fabric of the chapter;
 - 2) Lead on-the-ground promotion and encourage engagement amongst peers.
 - Develop volunteering opportunities for student members at events and conferences.
 - Offer complimentary tickets to events to student members to encourage them to 'get their feet wet' with the chapter.
 - Offer the opportunity to contribute content to the IABC UK website, on a selective basis and engage with the chapter via our LinkedIn page and other social media channels.
 - Suggest guest lecturers from our professional members to support their syllabus during the academic year.
 - Host an event at Bournemouth University and the London College of Communications with student members (the first event at Leeds University is scheduled for Jan 2016).
 - Trained five new mentors, including two members who are based in the northwest region of the UK, to help accommodate the expected increase in demand. This also helped to increase overall engagement with members who may not have the opportunity otherwise due to work responsibilities or location.
- Getting the most from the partnerships
 - Promote the partnership externally via social media.

- Communicate with student members in a segmented way, with personalised email blasts that feature relevant information and opportunities within the chapter.

Obstacles to implementation

- The main obstacle we have found in implementing our strategy is that there has been a big disconnect between university faculty expectations of student engagement (for example, in making the effort to apply for the Mentoring Programme) against their actual level.
- We have responded to them by turning our focus from a promotional angle to an engagement angle, and trying to get as many student members as possible to experience the chapter with a complimentary event ticket.
- Looking forward, we would like to eventually look at flexibility in pricing with head office in regards to international webinars and conferences, as offering targeted packages for segmented audiences would be much more appealing to a broader range of professionals.
- We have also streamlined our approach and offering around partnerships to provide the most value for students, for example
 - Long-term partnership rather than short-term (i.e. 2-3 years) – gives us more time to show value to faculty and students
 - Agree budget up front for any expenses. For Leeds, we have had agreement that it will take 2-3 years to make it sustainable and in the meantime, IABC UK, IABC EMEA and Leeds University will all be covering speaker travel costs and events.

Results

- The programme has well surpassed its quantitative goals, with an influx of 144 new student members from July 2014 to date from Bournemouth University, Leeds University and London College of Communication.
- Over half of IABC UK's membership now consists of student members – 52%.
- This is a big change for the chapter's demographics, and our offering will have to evolve to reflect this. The big questions being:
 - Will IABC UK retain these members in the long-term, or will they let their membership lapse when their free membership expires?
 - What do we have to do to convince them to remain members?
- Focus this year is to integrate the students as much as possible within the chapter to increase the possibility they will become long-term members.
- Eventually, in the next 1-2 years, our aim is to approach other universities with similar partnership opportunities when we see success with our pilot universities- but we want to nail our pilots down first.