

2018 Chapter Management Awards Entry **IABC Houston: Chapter Events**

Demonstrating success: IABC Houston's Focus on Events

- Strengthened IABC Houston's profile among the region's communicators and executives
- Raised the bar on events in late 2017 and over the course of 2018 by focusing on quality speakers and programs
- Organized a greater variety of events that address diversity of interests, as well as offer a welcoming environment to regularly connect members and non-members
- Tested new and innovative event concepts, including partnering with other organizations
- Increased overall turnout and participation by members as well as potential members
- Placed chapter finances on firmer footing and increased membership

Context

IABC Houston has been a part of the Houston region's fabric for more than 70 years. Originally chartered with the Southwestern Association of Industrial Editors in 1946 and following several permutations in the decades that followed, the organization became part of IABC in 1970. Membership in the organization and its profile in the community ebbed and flowed over the years, reflecting the outsized impact of the oil and gas industry as commodity prices rose and dropped in cycles.

For example, when Houston's energy industry blossomed in the early 1980s, the IABC chapter reached its all-time high of 490 members - and for a time stood as IABC's largest chapter globally. When the bottom fell out of the oil industry in the mid-1980s and hundreds of businesses throughout Houston shuttered, the chapter's membership dwindled. Subsequent oil and gas price dips and corporate consolidations continued to drive reductions in corporate communications roles across energy companies, as well as many of its support industries. By 2015 IABC Houston became a mid-sized chapter with about 150 members.

Strategy & Goals

All IABC Houston board members are committed to advancing the communications profession, creating stronger connections among current members and new ones, and to developing Houston region communication professionals – wherever they may be in their individual career journey - into strategic communicators who earn their seat at the heart of their organization.

Our [publicly stated goals](#) as a chapter are to:

- **Make Houston a communicator's destination** - Demonstrate Houston is a great business town that welcomes communicators; build partnerships with students to ensure the future remains strong.
- **Elevate the communication profession in Houston** - Deliver top-quality programs that are relevant and timely, by bringing in best-in-class thought leaders; Serve as the go-to organization for professional development for marketing and communication while offering an internationally recognized certification and annual awards program.
- **Deliver value to our members and their organizations** - Provide an international library of relevant subjects, regular development webinars, search availability for subject matter experts, and current job board/career search; offer value for participation.
- **Have fun** - Ensure our events vary in approach and always offer a welcoming environment to members and non-members; provide best-in-class networking events to grow a collaborative network.

To sustain alignment in board discussions and decisions year-to-year, IABC Houston's leadership holds annual board retreats to plan strategy, then sets monthly board meeting agendas to ensure progress on priorities. Summary reports detailing the discussions and decisions made at its [September 2017](#) and [August 2018](#) board retreats were posted online. This helps remind every board member of their commitments, and as resources to provide context and background to future board members as they become chapter leaders.

Objectives

To sustain membership growth and continue to build IABC Houston's profile, chapter leadership agreed to tee up distinctive events that underpin the value of membership. The chapter is focused on:

- Raising the bar on events in late 2017 and over the course of 2018 by focusing on quality speakers and programs that help boost perceived value of being a part of IABC
- Testing new and innovative event concepts, including partnering with other Houston region organizations to foster connections and share best practices
- Organizing a suite of events that offer a welcoming environment to current members as well as potential new ones, while avoiding the risk of "event fatigue"
- Maintaining chapter finances on firm footing by hosting events that generate revenue
- Sustaining the trend of increasing membership to attain IABC large member chapter status in 2019
- Strengthening IABC Houston's profile across the region

Measurement

The IABC Houston board gauges the effectiveness of our events program through a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures that include:

- Number of events held
- Event attendance by current members and potential new members (guests and non-members)
- Feedback from member and event surveys, as well as more informal assessment mechanisms
- Event finances based on profit/loss and sponsorships
- Membership growth

Implementation

The board reviewed data and insights from membership and event surveys, interviews with long-term and new members, and feedback from non-members who frequently attend IABC Houston events. Some of the findings were:

- Understanding and appreciating the value of IABC membership varied greatly based on how long someone has been a member, how regularly they attended events and activities, and the individual's proficiency in the use of technology.
- Hosting events and activities with a focus on greater diversity and away from downtown Houston was frequently cited by several respondents. The Houston region spans nine Texas counties that cover an area larger than New Hampshire, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware and Rhode Island combined. It is the fourth most populous U.S. metropolitan area, with over 6 million residents. Recent studies also confirmed Houston is the most diverse metropolitan area in the country, with a significant proportion (~20%) of foreign-born residents.
- There is a lot of interest in learning more about Houston's diverse sectors beyond energy, such as health care, finance, aerospace, etc. The same goes for rapidly evolving technologies in these sectors, and the way they are reshaping how communications and engagement is being conducted with internal and external stakeholders.

- IABC Houston could better serve the broad experience range of communication practitioners. Feedback was that the chapter could further distinguish itself in providing value to attract and retain members by regularly addressing varying needs of professionals based on the stage of individuals' careers.
- Adapting learnings from the "lazy leader" session at the 2018 Leadership Institute, which several board members attended, the chapter is addressing member demands for professional growth and development opportunities through its professional development offer, as well as teeing up volunteering options that members can elect to take on based on their skills and availability.

A majority of respondents also indicated that IABC Houston distinguishes itself from other Houston region organizations by being a "true" professional communicators' group (vs. being an agency-focused or business development forum). The board actively works to enhance this perception through the chapter's suite of events and the way they are marketed.

- **Suite of Events**

The chapter organized 31 events in 2018, seven more than the previous calendar year. Responsibilities for planning these events was divvied up among board and chapter members, to ease the workload and for succession planning by preparing future IABC Houston leaders. For details about each event, including links to events web pages, see work sample #1: IABC Houston Events 2018-11 FINAL.pdf.

- **Chapter Luncheons**

Based on discussions at the 2017 Board Retreat, the decision was made to up the ante with the chapter's bread and butter luncheons. Every year IABC Houston hosts seven to eight professional development luncheons with featured speakers on varied communications topics. Post-event surveys and informal feedback from attendees reinforced with the board the need to offer greater value at these events to members and guests alike. Beginning in fall 2017, focus turned to recruiting consistently high-quality speakers. Powerful examples over the past 12 months included:

- ✓ Immediately following Hurricane Harvey's devastating blow to the Houston region, a panel of Fortune 10, nonprofit, and healthcare communicators led a discussion at the September 2017 luncheon about ways communicators shaped effective hurricane response before, during and after the disaster.
- ✓ The featured speaker at the April 2018 luncheon was Reid Ryan, one of the youngest Major League Baseball team presidents, who spoke about the challenges in building a championship-level engagement strategy for the Houston Astros, then sustaining it in the months that followed the team earning the title of World Series Champions for the first time in franchise history. He also detailed how and why the team parlayed that win to invigorate and re-energize the Houston region and its fan base in the midst of post-Harvey recovery.
- ✓ The September 2018 luncheon speaker, Russ Capper, Houston Exponential executive director, offered attendees an overview on the three-plus year effort by the region's business, government and academic leaders to grow its [technology and innovation ecosystem](#) into a world-class hub. He also challenged Houston communicators to do their part in helping shape the region's global reputation as a leading innovation ecosystem.
- ✓ In October 2018, South by Southwest senior publicist Brett Cannon and Giant Noise Vice President Jennifer Sinski of Austin led a panel discussion on utilizing influencers as storytellers and marketers for their clients and events. South by

Southwest is an extremely popular annual conference in Austin, Texas, that celebrates the convergence of the interactive, film and music industries. The duo shared their insights on identifying types of influencers, key advantages of working with them, and crafting powerful messaging with the influencer in mind. The session fostered a lively discussion with the audience, and several attendees stayed for close to an hour after the panel discussion concluded to continue the conversation.

In addition to focusing on quality luncheon speakers, the chapter regularly enlists members to serve as greeters and table captains to help promote the welcoming environment being nurtured, ensuring that newcomers and veterans alike are introduced and encouraged to engage in discussion.

Overall attendance at luncheons during the 2017-18 year increased more than 29 percent compared to the prior fiscal year. Post-event surveys over the past 12 months also confirmed that 70-80 percent of attendees were very to extremely likely to recommend the events to a co-worker. The chapter spent on average \$1,200 per event and collected around \$1,700 each - resulting in a profit of about \$500 apiece. This year the luncheons are expected to net the chapter close to \$4,000.

- Annual Gala

IABC Houston's highest profile annual event is the Bronze Quill Awards Gala in June. It is considered the premier awards program for Houston area communicators, with Bronze Quill trophy recipients being honored by their peers and their employers. Fifty-two entries were submitted in the [2018 Bronze Quill](#), one entry more than the previous year.

The chapter also honors an [Executive Communicator of the Year](#) (ECOY) at the gala, recognizing the achievements of an executive in the region who values communications as a key business function. This year the honor went to Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, in recognition of his leadership in several times of crisis – particularly Hurricane Harvey. The chapter worked with the judge's office to issue a press release announcing his being named 2018 ECOY and plastered the announcement in both organizations' social media channels.

Another feature of the gala is the [Downs Matthews Memorial Scholarship](#) presentation, named after an IABC Houston pioneer. This year's awardee was Imani Stevens, a senior at the University of Houston majoring in media studies. Imani is also a local museum guide and part-time event DJ. Her goal is to expose inner-city youth to the field of communication and arts.

The Houston chapter spends just over \$20,000 on Bronze Quill for facility rental, meals, trophies, the scholarship and fees for the award judging platform. This year the event netted \$3,323, thanks to several cash and in-kind sponsorships as well as event cost savings.

- Member Orientation Luncheon

In May 2018, the chapter partnered with the Harris County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) to host an orientation luncheon for a dozen new and renewing members. Participants were briefed by the VP membership, chapter historian and president-elect about the chapter's history and membership benefits. The event was

free (the chapter covered the \$80 cost for boxed lunches and refreshments). At the conclusion of the IABC portion of the presentation, the OEM executive director gave a personal behind-the-scenes tour of the Harris County Emergency Operations Center and the metro transportation command center – which is still being talked about by those in attendance.

- Chapter Socials

The chapter hosts three to four socials each year that encourage members and non-members to gather informally after work at different locations around Houston. These unstructured events encourage connections in a fun setting, generally leading to inquiries for more membership information and new member sign-ups. The events are “cash bar” and draw dozens of attendees, and the chapter contributed up to \$100 at each event to cover the cost of appetizers.

- ESIG Luncheons

IABC Houston is fortunate to have a Strategic Interest Group focused on entrepreneurs in its midst. The Entrepreneurs’ Strategic Interest Group (ESIG) marked its 25-year silver anniversary in 2018. ESIG was formed by a fun, enthusiastic group of self-employed IABC Houston members to research and report on topics of common interest to communication entrepreneurs – a mission it continues to deliver on via monthly luncheons and its speakers’ program. These events, which annually draw about 200 attendees, are revenue-neutral to the chapter since ESIG members manage expenses directly with the restaurant where its meetings are held.

- Partnership Events

To build its profile in the community and strengthen connections with other associations, IABC Houston took on three partnership events in 2018.

The largest was also its first in several years. In collaboration with the Business Marketing Association, the Houston Interactive Marketing Association, and the Society of Technical Communicators, the first “In Cahoots” Holiday Mixer was held on December 14, 2017. The event was a unique opportunity for Houston area marketers and communicators to interact in a relaxed, entertaining and fun atmosphere, and give back to the community by donating proceeds to the Houston Food Bank. IABC Houston and the other organizations pitched in less than \$300 apiece to cover the cost of appetizers and raffle prizes. Although free to attend, participants were responsible for taking care of personal bar tabs. Following its ringing success last December, the second annual “In Cahoots” Holiday Mixer is set for December 13 – this time with six other partner organizations and an estimated 300 in attendance.

In collaboration with the Houston chapter of the National Investor Relations Institute (NIRI), a luncheon titled [Integrating Investor Relations & Corporate Communications](#) attracted over 60 attendees in April. The event featured the heads of communications and investor relations at ConocoPhillips highlighting the ways their company benefitted in the marketplace after the investor relations and corporate communications functions joined forces. IABC and NIRI managed attendance costs/revenue for their respective members, and both realized a small net profit.

The chapter then piloted a mid-afternoon “Dialog Session” in June in partnership with Station Houston, a regional technology startup incubator and accelerator. The event came about when IABC learned that APCO Worldwide’s president and managing director of operations Evan Kraus, who is based in Washington, D.C., would be in Houston on business and available to engage with IABC members and tech startup entrepreneurs. Just over 30 people joined the [Influencer Advocacy in the Digital Age](#) session, taking part in the lively discussion for close to 90 minutes (30 minutes longer than originally scheduled). After the event, Station Houston staff toured attendees around their facility. Station Houston also covered facility costs and provided refreshments.

- **Networking Nine**

To address member requests to offer more after-hours events at different locations, the chapter board decided to pilot a monthly dinner and dialogue option that adapts learnings from a similar effort in another IABC chapter, for members only. After consulting with our counterparts in San Francisco, we launched Networking Nine (#Net9) dinners in September 2018 to offer Houston communicators a unique professional development and networking opportunity.

Featuring a handful of small-group dinner discussions, Networking Nine gives members the opportunity to explore new ideas, share real-world challenges, and build deeper IABC relationships. The dinners allow attendees to network with fellow members in a private environment while engaging in an off-the-record discussion on key issues or trends impacting the profession. Although the chapter organizes these events and doesn’t charge a fee to register, attendees are asked to cover the cost of the meals directly with the restaurant. Early successes have led to requests to host the dinners monthly through 2019, and organizations like the Texas Medical Center (the largest medical center in the world, and home for some of the most advanced healthcare and medical research globally) are already inquiring about co-hosting future events at their location.

- **Event Marketing**

The chapter budgeted \$4,000 in 2017 and \$5,000 this year for overall marketing. In addition to covering costs for website management and key social media post promotions, the chapter has engaged designers and media consultants to supplement work done by chapter volunteers. The bulk of this work centers on promoting registrations and attendance at chapter events. Event marketing continues after the event has taken place to share key points speakers made during their presentations, highlight attendance and post photos of those who took part in the event (*see work sample #2: IABC Houston Events Posting Samples.pdf*).

In 2017, IABC Houston’s board engaged a consultant to conduct a marketing audit examining the chapter’s overall communication strategies and organizational structure, as well as identify strengths and weaknesses. The audit helped lay the groundwork for the chapter’s marketing strategic plan, with the aim of maximizing the effectiveness of IABC Houston’s existing marketing channels and practices. It also helped in the development of more consistent messaging, avoiding duplication and information overload. A communications/marketing plan is now developed and scaled to each event.

In addition to email announcements and newsletters, the chapter relies on the following online channels: [website](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

Summary

In 2018, IABC Houston pursued plans for 31 events, which by year-end are expected to attract more than 1,060 participants. Compared to 2017, that's an increase in the number of events (seven more than last year) and attendees (220 more than last year).

Consistent feedback via post-event surveys and informal conversational feedback confirm that most attendees found the event speakers and topics of great interest. Also, 70-80 percent of attendees were very to extremely likely to recommend IABC Houston events to their colleagues as a result.

Indications that the chapter's approach to high-grade events and speakers is having a positive impact on perception about the chapter include:

- Inquiries from regionally and nationally recognized communications and business executives interested in addressing IABC Houston members; and,
- Interest from companies to sponsor chapter luncheons and other activities.



A more critical measure of progress is increased membership enrollment. At the conclusion of the October 2017 Member Month campaign, the chapter had 148 members on record. This year the chapter closed the 2018 Member Month with 172 members on the rolls – that's 24 more members. A 16 percent increase!



In November 2018, the chapter was ranked first internationally for mid-sized chapters for the highest percentage of member retention (70 percent) during membership month in October, and third among mid-sized chapters for member growth.

This achievement featured prominently in IABC's social media platforms, as well as the November 2018 Leader Letter.

IABC Houston's board is already hard at work building on the progress made over the last couple of years in preparation for 2019. It's in keeping with the commitment chapter leaders made to advance the profession, create connection and develop strategic communicators -



while also having fun!

Work Samples

Work Sample #1: [IABC Houston Events 2018-11 FINAL.pdf](#)

Work Sample #2: [IABC Houston Events Posting Samples.pdf](#)