



Chapter: IABC Topeka

Category: Chapter Events

Division 1: Small Chapter

Title: IABC Topeka: Chapter Events — When “It” Hits the Fan: 5 Steps to Effective Crisis Communications

INTRODUCTION

IABC Topeka is a small chapter with a steady, dedicated membership of about 40. The chapter was established in the mid-1980s and remains a reliable source of professional development for communicators in Topeka and the surrounding areas for four decades running. Our membership includes professionals who work in corporate or non-profit organizations, as well as independent contractors. Members hold roles in public relations, copywriting, editing, social strategy and strategic communications management.

As a chapter, we strive to be the go-to local source for Topeka communicators to grow in their professions and network with like-minded peers. We host monthly professional development (PD) programs, a summer soiree networking event and a holiday party each year. Every other year, we put on a Bronze Quill Awards. On the off years of our awards program, we instead host an immersive half-day program, bringing in multiple industry speakers for a packed afternoon of PD sessions.

Our monthly PD events are the heart of our chapter’s success. Generally, we host them the first Wednesday of each month at 11:30 a.m. The first half hour is dedicated to networking, and then the day’s program is from noon until 1 p.m. Members are charged \$15, and guests are \$20. Meetings are typically held at a local university classroom, the public library or a meeting room at the presenter’s corporate office — regardless, we always strive for a free venue. Boxed lunches are catered in and covered by the price of admission. Our chapter typically feels accomplished if we break even when hosting a PD event with anywhere from 10-20 attendees.

Our board of volunteers is small but mighty, like our chapter. We have a Chapter President, Past President, VP of Finance, VP of Membership, VP of Special Events, VP of Communications, VP of Professional Development and a Communications Chair. It is often hard filling those eight positions for their one-year terms, and none of the board positions have committees or other members assisting with their roles.

Serving on IABC Topeka’s board requires plenty of time and dedication to pull off even one event each month, but we all believe in our chapter’s purpose to provide quality, professional, educational opportunities for our members. So, when we had the opportunity to provide a bonus PD event to our community, we jumped at the chance.

Gerard Braud is an internationally renowned crisis communications speaker and coach, as well as a (now former) member of IABC in Louisiana. In September 2019, our local university, Washburn University, hired Gerard to lead an intensive two-day training for their PR team. Two of our IABC Topeka board members work on Washburn University’s PR team and benefited from the crisis communications training. With their help, so did the rest of IABC Topeka. And we put on the entire event with 12 days’ notice.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Host a bonus PD event for IABC Topeka outside of our regularly scheduled monthly PD events. By pushing ourselves outside of our comfort zone, we will give our chapter members and other Topeka community members an additional opportunity to learn relevant and applicable skills while exemplifying our industry connections and expertise.
2. Fulfill a request for a crisis communications program on our recent member/non-member chapter survey that asked for PD event ideas. We will show members we are listening to their suggestions and trying to meet their expectations.

3. Connect with and invite the broader Topeka community of communications professionals to this event with the hope of attracting potential new members and/or regular guests.

BUDGET

Washburn University's PR team flew crisis communications coach Gerard Braud to Topeka from Louisiana for a two-day training on Sept. 23 and 24, 2019. Twelve days prior, the IABC Topeka board discovered he would be in town and contacted him to see if he would speak with our members. In less than 24 hours, Gerard agreed, and we were off and running with securing the venue, ordering catering and notifying our lists of members and non-members to register for this surprise event.

We hired Gerard to present his one-hour workshop called "[When "It" Hits the Fan: 5 Steps to Effective Crisis Communications](#)" for \$450. He said he typically charges thousands of dollars to speak but gave us a discount because 1) he wanted to help another IABC chapter, and 2) our workshop would be a bonus speaking engagement for Gerard during his time in Topeka. Additionally, we bought two of Gerard's books (\$24.95 each) to raffle off as door prizes to help entice attendance.

We secured a venue at a local restaurant, AJ's Pizza, for a great price on short notice. The room rental was \$25, in addition to a \$75 minimum food order. We had used this venue once before and had a good experience. Plus, pizza is always an economical option when feeding a crowd, so this seemed like a great fit for this event. We reserved the venue from 5 to 8 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 23. Seating in the room could accommodate 30: we hoped for 20.

Our final hurdle: What do we charge attendees for this event? As stated previously, our regular monthly PD events usually charged members \$15 and guests \$20. However, in August 2019, we conducted a 15-question survey of members and non-members (previous members, potential members and guests from past events). The survey's goal was to get general feedback on our IABC Topeka chapter. We received 27 responses to the survey, which might not seem like a lot, but it was a great sample size for our small chapter, and we've continued to make chapter improvements and changes addressing this survey feedback.

Out of the 27 responses, 5 people said they don't regularly attend our events because our events are too expensive. Additionally, 8 of the 15 responders who identified as non-members said IABC was either too expensive as a whole and/or their employer won't pay for it. Due to these responses, we decided to decrease our regular monthly PD event costs to attendees. Members can now attend monthly PD events for free, while guests are charged \$10. We still follow this price model today.

However, we felt we could not justify those low prices for this bonus PD event. In the end, we decided to charge members \$10 and non-members \$20. We thought this was an excellent price for the value, and we hoped it would entice attendance. We were not expecting to break even or make money on this event, but, of course, we wanted to try to make back as much money as we were expecting to spend.

Item	Price
Room rental + food at AJ's Pizza	\$140
Speaking price for Gerard Braud	\$450
2 books to raffle off as door prizes (\$24.95 each)	\$49.90
TOTAL SPENT	\$639.90

IMPLEMENTATION

- **Event Strategy**

We knew it was a gamble to go forward with the event at all, even without the added pressure of the time constraints to get the word out in less than two weeks. For starters, we had already hosted our regularly scheduled

PD event for September. This crisis communications presentation would be extremely unique, in that it would be the first time in recent memory IABC Topeka hosted two events in one month.

Then, we were limited to Gerard's busy schedule. Since he would be working at Washburn University during the day, this presentation had to be held in the evening — a time period we never host events. And because we were paying Gerard to present (although at a discounted rate), we made the decision to charge members \$10 and non-members \$20 — an immediate break from the new price points we announced earlier that same month.

Ultimately, we decided as a board to go for it. Our members said they wanted crisis communication training, and if they took the time to fill out a survey, we wanted to show them we were listening. We also wanted to provide the community's communicators a valuable resource during a trying time. A popular Washburn University student had recently been the victim of senseless gun violence, and the school's PR team was having a hard time navigating how to tell the story. That's why they hired Gerard in the first place, to be prepared for any future crisis, ranging from national disasters to school shootings to pandemics. By our chapter offering this pared down version of Gerard's training, we wanted to show other communicators the importance of being prepared for any emergency.

- **Event Management**

Pulling off this event in 12 days required a full effort from our small board. We had it all handled in less than 24 hours. Once the VP of Professional Development secured the speaker on the afternoon of Sept. 10, it was all hands on deck. An email to the board quickly got the conversation going:

Chapter President: Approved the funds to pay the speaker and host the event. Organized the details (event time and price of admission) and led the board discussion.

VP of Finance: Suggested we *personally* reach out to those we know in communications who aren't currently participating with IABC Topeka, which the VP of Membership then did.

VP of Membership: Promoted the event to those who either weren't familiar with IABC or had been considering membership previously. Also personally reached out to those who attended the latest event to thank them for coming and invite them to this bonus event.

VP of Special Events: Collaborated on price of admission and offered other guidance on event details.

VP of Communications: Emailed the event eblast to our member/non-member lists and posted the event on Facebook. Also extended the invite to communications teams at area colleges in neighboring towns: Kansas State, University of Kansas, Emporia State and University of Missouri-Kansas City.

VP of Professional Development: Secured the venue, the speaker and event details to market the program.

Communications Chair: Ordered the pizza to be ready at the start of the event and arranged the room set up.

- **Event Marketing**

For our regular monthly PD events, we utilize our StarChapter management system to email all members/non-members of upcoming events. Our email marketing reaches about 250 people. We also [post upcoming events to our website](#) and [create a Facebook event](#) hosted by our IABC Topeka Facebook page. We did the same marketing for this bonus event, although we did title it a "BONUS EVENT!" We know our Facebook events and posts don't get a great reach and most stay informed with our chapter through our personal emails and e-newsletters.

In the days leading up to the event, we sent three emails: an event announcement, event reminder (sent a week later), and a last-chance to register email (sent one week after the reminder). Additionally, we posted reminders of the Facebook event twice on our chapter's Facebook page.

MEASUREMENT

Success was measured via anecdotal feedback from attendees and the speaker, as well as ticket sales and reach.

Goals and Objectives	Measure
1. Host a bonus PD event for IABC Topeka outside of our regularly scheduled monthly	In the end, we had 23 pre-register for the event, one no-show and two who came unannounced. We were

<p>PD events. By pushing ourselves outside of our comfort zone, we will give our chapter members and other Topeka community members an additional opportunity to learn relevant and applicable skills while exemplifying our industry connections and expertise.</p>	<p>exceptionally pleased with 24 people in attendance! Of those, only five were members. Attendees were engaging and networking with each other throughout the evening, making connections with old friends and new. The closing Q&A portion lasted longer than planned, and the two attendees who won the door prizes of Gerard Braud's books were thrilled. This event proved IABC is a relevant organization to our community even outside of members, since 19/24 were guests. All guests now regularly receive our email marketing, effectively growing our chapter's reach. Although no new connections have become members, many were interested in IABC's offerings and have attended some of our other monthly PD events.</p>
<p>2. Fulfill a request for a crisis communications program on our recent member/non-member chapter survey that asked for PD event ideas. We will show members we are listening to their suggestions and trying to meet their expectations.</p>	<p>In our communications marketing the event, we stated "crisis communications" was a requested event idea from our recent member/non-member survey. We did this to provide transparency, to prove we are working to serve our base and to justify why we were fulfilling the suggestion with a bonus PD event.</p>
<p>3. Connect with and invite the broader Topeka community of communications professionals to this event with the hope of attracting potential new members and/or regular guests.</p>	<p>We had groups of attendees from two colleges an hour from Topeka: Kansas State University and Emporia State University. We also had a handful of past members and others we don't see often at events. This bonus PD event provided an excellent opportunity to connect and build relationships. One past member in attendance wrote on Facebook: "It was wonderful. Thank you for the opportunity!"</p>

RESULTS

We pulled off a bonus professional event from start to finish in 12 days. It was only possible through teamwork as a board and through our board's professional connections.

The following day of the event, Gerard Braud emailed a note to the Topeka chapter board: *"Thank you again for inviting me to speak to your chapter. You did an amazing job of promoting the event in a short amount of time. Well done. You have a great chapter with some really amazing people. I've had a number of deeper discussions with attendees who seem to be motivated to take the next step toward preparation for a crisis. As communicators, seeing people take that next step makes all we do worthwhile."*

Additionally, this event proved why we should continue to take survey results seriously, even if 27 responses doesn't seem like much to go on. We have continued to take ideas from the member/non-member survey and listen to direct event attendee feedback while planning out our calendar of monthly PD events.

Overall, we accomplished what we set out to do. We were very pleased in all aspects of the bonus PD event, from program execution and content shared to overall attendance and the broad reach of guests. Yes, we lost about \$200 on this event, but that wasn't surprising. We weren't planning to make money. The main point of this event was to bring more value to our chapter and prove our industry expertise while building connections.

We learned to not be afraid to jump at a chance to bring value to members, even if it might not be ideal timing. If you are willing to put the plan in motion, others will help pull it off for the greater cause of bringing value and opportunity to all.