



Chapter: IABC Topeka

Category: Professional Development

Division 1: Small Chapter

Title: IABC Topeka: Professional Development 2019 – 2020

INTRODUCTION

The IABC Topeka chapter is located in the capital city of Kansas. The organization began in the 1980s as a way for communicators to connect and learn from each other. Our members work in government, healthcare, not-for-profit organizations, the financial sector, higher education and more. We are a small chapter, averaging 40 members at any given time, with both long-time members and young professionals engaged with the chapter and serving on the board. We reach more than 250 across northeast Kansas through email campaigns and social media.

Our goals as a chapter are to provide learning opportunities for our members, enhance the communications profession in our region and provide opportunities for professionals to connect. Communicators benefit from the chapter's consistent monthly professional development seminars. We host ten hour-long seminars annually, attended by a mix of members and non-members. Each seminar focuses on a timely communications topic, typically presented by a knowledgeable speaker or panel. In addition to these professional development seminars, we host two social events a year and a biennial half-day professional development conference.

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.

Our biggest challenge is declining membership and engagement. Part of that challenge is offering professional development events at a time and location that is convenient for most members. Additionally, as organizational budgets tighten, we need to justify the cost of membership beyond our monthly professional development events. These struggles aren't new, but in 2019, we finally regrouped as a board to try and tackle them.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching strategy for chapter success in recent years has been to increase: awareness of the chapter, attendance at professional development events, and membership. Our hope is that increasing awareness of the chapter and engaging with potential members will lead to increased membership over time. To achieve these goals, our focus has been on:

- Consistently communicating with members and potential members to establish relationships
- Providing monthly professional development opportunities relevant to local needs
- Increasing membership and turning frequent guests into members

In theory, these initiatives were good, but we weren't seeing the results we needed to warrant our board's hard work. Our events were consistent but our audiences were not. Our membership wasn't growing, and our board morale was low. We had to regroup to find a way to make this chapter work for its members as it once did.

2019 was a turning point for our chapter. We realized we needed to seek feedback and potentially rethink our processes in order to stay relevant to our community. In July, we created a survey (attached as a work sample) for members and non-members to help us gauge what worked and what didn't. We used our StarChapter management system to email our list of about 250 people, saying: "We want to hear from YOU! Whether you're a member, or a guest who has attended an event or two, we would love to hear your feedback about our chapter."

Within the email announcing the survey, we also asked interested persons to join board members for informal talks we called "Spill the Tea with IABC." We held three of these small talks at a local coffee house in July, one in

the morning hours, one over lunch and one in the evening. Interestingly enough, these gatherings were mainly attended by veteran IABC Topeka members who offered to help our board pull through our current rough patch.

Thanks to the structured feedback from the survey and the anecdotal feedback from our “Spill the Tea with IABC” talks, we solidified necessary changes to improve our programming and our chapter direction as a whole. We decided to set attainable, measurable goals to act as checkpoints to ensure we were moving in the right direction. We landed on three goals for the 2019 – 2020 year, beginning in September 2019:

- **Goal 1:** Increase our Facebook engagement to 10% to encourage connection and increase awareness of our chapter and our PD events
- **Goal 2:** Have an average attendance of 15 people at monthly professional development events — both members and non-members
- **Goal 3:** Overall gain of three members

These goals were in line with our overall strategy and would help us gauge whether the changes we made to our programming and communication tactics were effective.

BUDGET

Our monthly PD events are 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. We do not pay speakers, aside from comping their lunch and giving them a small thank you gift, so our boxed lunches are often the only fee we have to pay. Still, our chapter typically feels accomplished if we break even when hosting a PD event.

In our 2019 shakeup, we chose not to set a specific budget for our monthly PD events. Of course, our hope was to break even or make money off of events, but that goal was secondary to attendance and membership. Instead of setting a specific budget, we actively tried to reduce our expenses. That meant getting rid of the boxed lunches and moving our monthly PD time to 4:30 p.m. The survey results suggested this new time would improve attendance.

Armed with data from our survey and “Spill the Tea” sessions, we knew members didn’t see the catered lunches as a benefit, so we chose to stop investing our resources into providing lunch. By cutting the lunches, we also 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.

IMPLEMENTATION

- **Programs**

Thanks to our survey, we had a number of excellent responses from members and non-members of what programming they wanted us to provide. We regularly referenced this survey in each monthly board planning meeting to ensure all upcoming PD speakers were engaging, relevant and diverse in content and presentation. We found that our best PD events met this criteria, and it was evident in attendance and regular attendee feedback. Some of our most successful programs included:

- [Sept. 2019: When “It” Hits the Fan: 5 Steps to Effective Crisis Communications](#)
- [Jan. 2020: Recharged Rebrand: How Westar’s Corporate Comms Team Led the Way to Become Everygy](#)
- [Feb. 2020: Topeka Positive Experience: From One Idea to 10,000 Members on Facebook](#)
- [May 2020: Lessons From the Shawnee County COVID-19 Frontline Response Team](#)
- [Oct. 2020: Creating Inclusive Content and Being a Voice for the Voiceless](#)

- **Providing Value**

Our monthly PD events are the heart of our chapter. It's the one thing our members expect our board to provide, and our main area we are consistently proud of yet constantly trying to improve. We promote all upcoming events through monthly newsletter eblasts, upcoming event eblasts, Facebook posts, our Twitter feed and our LinkedIn group. As a small chapter, it is hard to juggle all of these channels, so we focus mainly on sending out emails with all upcoming chapter information. Our members know to expect chapter updates through email, as well.

When the pandemic hit, we had never hosted a webinar before. But, if we wanted to remain relevant with our monthly PD events, we knew we had to try. As a way of easing into the webinar world, our chapter president attended an IABC Kansas City webinar to see how they navigated the virtual platform. The Kansas City chapter was well-organized with a professionally designed PowerPoint from the start, showcasing upcoming chapter events, the chapter's social channels and information on the day's speaker. With this inspiration, we also adopted this presentation tool, and our virtual monthly PD events have run smoothly ever since.

Another silver lining to switching to virtual PD events has been how we measure success. Prior to going virtual, our event attendance was increasing thanks to our recent changes implemented from our member survey. From September 2019 to March 2020, we averaged 16 people registering and 14 attending. Unfortunately, for those who registered but couldn't attend, they missed out on our monthly offering. Now that we're virtual, that's not the case. If you register for a webinar, you receive a recording of the presentation via email following the event, regardless if you attended or not. We see this as an added value we can provide to all.

MEASUREMENT

Success was measured via calculations from Facebook engagement, event attendance and membership total.

Goals and Objectives	Measure
1. Increase our Facebook engagement to 10% to encourage connection and increase awareness of our chapter and events	Goal met: Our average engagement rate July 2019 – December 2020 was 10.36%
2. Have an average attendance of 15 people at monthly professional development events — both members and non-members	Partially met: Including all PD events from September 2019 – December 2020, the average number of people registered for events was 16. However, the average in attendance was 13. Remembering our move to webinars in April 2020, our numbers improve slightly, as we are still able to engage all who register, regardless if they attend. In this mindset, our average PD events "attendance" from September 2019 – December 2020 was 15. We consider this a win after a hard year.
3. Overall gain of three members	Goal met: In July 2019, we had 25 members. By October 2019, we had increased to 44 members. From July 2019 – December 2020, our monthly average number of members was 40.

RESULTS EXPLAINED

- **Goal 1: Increase our Facebook engagement to 10% to encourage connection and increase awareness of our chapter and events**

The more a person interacts with our page, the more often our page will appear in their newsfeed. Therefore, without setting a specific posting goal, we posted several times a month to try to engage our followers, including:

- Event reminders and recaps
- Links to IABC articles, webinars and other member benefits
- Notifications regarding conferences and chapter information
- Bronze Quill Award reminders and entry information
- Shout outs to members who received awards or recognition for their work
- “Meet the Board” videos and messages from board members
- Fun holiday posts

Additionally, we created a Facebook event for each of our professional development events and updated the event page leading up to the date.

From July 2019 – December 2020, our average engagement rate was 10.36%, meaning we met our goal. Our engagement rate varied a lot, with engagement anywhere from 0% to 32%. We found that posts with pictures or videos of members tended to perform really well and will continue to implement this into our social media presence going forward.

- **Goal 2: Have an average attendance of 15 people at monthly professional development events – both members and non-members**

Through survey and anecdotal data, we knew we needed to make some changes to increase attendance at our events. On the survey, we had a question asking people how often they attend events. Seventy percent of respondents said that they try to attend a few a year or rarely attend events. The next question asked people for a primary reason why they do not frequently attend events, if applicable, and 65% cited the timing as an issue. Our meetings were held over the lunch hour, so we moved them to 4:30 p.m. in the hopes that would be easier for people. We also changed the price structure to make it more cost efficient for members and guests to attend. Members can now attend monthly professional development events for free and guests pay \$10; previously, members paid \$10 and guests paid \$20. We did this both to entice people to come and to increase the perceived value of membership.

We used survey responses and current events to guide our topics for professional development events. In October 2020, our meeting was over how to create inclusive content and embrace diversity in messaging. The most popular requests were for speakers with case stories to share, story telling, branding and crisis communications. We have hosted meetings over all of those topics and they were some of our most well-attended events.

We had 14 PD events from July 2019 – December 2020. We did not meet our goal of 15 people in attendance at each meeting, although we were trending that way before the pandemic hit. While our average registration per event was 16 people, our average attendance rate was 13 people, including members and non-members.

We saw a larger drop between registration and attendance in webinars than when meetings were in-person. Anecdotally from hearing from members but also personal feedback as a board, we note this drop-off in attendance to two things: 1) it’s harder to network over Zoom and gain valuable time making connections with others, and 2) Zoom fatigue causes people to not want to sit through another online meeting. As a way to help, we decided to email out the recorded presentations to all who register, including those who do not attend live, so more people can still gain value from our programs.

- **Goal 3: Overall gain of three members**

Lastly, we were thrilled to meet our third goal. The board, particularly the membership chair, reached out to potential members regularly to invite them to join our chapter. The membership chair also worked hard to retain current members. In October, we organized a communications campaign around membership month. We promoted it on social media, in newsletters and through personal emails to potential members. In early 2020, we got the news that we increased our chapter membership by more than five percent in October. IABC awarded us with a free membership to give away, which we did at a meeting in March 2020. In July 2019, we had approximately 25 members and in October 2019, we had 44 members. Our average number of members was 40 from July 2019 – December 2020. Our goal was a gain of three new members and we met that goal by October.