

IABC Greater Cincinnati: Professional Development

Introduction to IABC Greater Cincinnati

IABC Greater Cincinnati is a small chapter (average mid- to high 40s in membership) within the US Heritage Region. For 42 years, we have been serving communicators in four counties of southwestern Ohio and three counties of northern Kentucky. Our chapter has remained steady in membership and activities and we have been recognized for member retention. Like many chapters, we assign a high priority to ways of engaging members, providing member value, and attracting members. This CMA entry reflects our recent efforts to deliver more relevant, diverse content and formats to reach our members and prospects, which became more challenging with a pandemic.

Goals and Objectives

In our 2019-2020 Chapter Plan, we set this strategic goal: **Design and deliver programming based on input from a diverse “Mastermind Group” of senior communicators who need professional development for their teams.** We wanted to accomplish the following:

- Deliver programming that local communicators and their teams want and need based on their business challenges
- Help attendees earn and keep their seat at the table by building relevancy within their organizations and profession
- Ensure the stability/relevance of the IABC Greater Cincinnati chapter

Next, we defined three key steps to accomplish our goal:

1. Plan and facilitate a Mastermind Session, focused on a broad range of business communications
2. Map out our 2020 program schedule and topics aligned with the input of local leaders
3. Ask chapter board members to “divide and conquer” to plan our professional development programs by researching opportunities, scheduling speakers/topics, and setting potential dates; then our newly created Logistics Manager/Logistics Committee would secure venues and catering

MASTERMINDS SESSION (JANUARY 2020)

Purpose: Better serve current and prospective members of IABC Greater Cincinnati by building programming that elevates the relevance of business communications. We would do this by listening to communication leaders representing companies in our region.

Implementation: A board taskforce met with a panel of seven area leaders, mainly at the VP/Director level, from a mix of profit and non-profit organizations. They were asked to identify their top communications needs and challenges.

Based on the input gathered, the board prioritized and made plans to address as many topics as possible in the 2020 program schedule.

Session Results: The panel provided many suggestions on how to meet the needs of their communications staff, such as what skills are most needed, and that topics should target various levels of experience among the attendees. The following list includes samples of the many recommendations from the Masterminds Session:

- **Challenges** – Addressing a multi-generational workforce, getting IT support for communications, overcoming change fatigue in the workforce, reducing ambivalence among leaders about communication
- **Needs** – Finding the right metrics to show business value, gaining crisis management skills
- **Advantages** – We are strategists (we can drive decisions), we have confidence to go outside our lane
- **Priorities** – Prove value to leaders, demonstrate data driven-decision making, be translators (“What’s in it for me?”)
- **How IABC Can Help** – Include case studies, have regular contact with leaders, segment programs by level of experience or depth (101, 201, etc.)
- **What More IABC Can Do** – Pre- and post-meeting surveys; more workshops, presentations, and small group discussion (“How did you...”)

An important measure of success of the Masterminds Session was the enthusiasm and gratitude of the participants, who wanted to share email addresses and keep in touch with each other. The chapter board also developed new relationships in the communications community.

STAYING RELEVANT IN A COMPLEX WORLD (VIDEO SERIES)

Our learnings from the Masterminds Session dovetailed effectively with the relevancy theme of a video series we had just begun. The videos focused on how communication professionals can continue to meet their goals in an increasingly complex world, with more channels and more competition for attention than ever. Episodes 2 and 3 featured topics from the Masterminds Session.

- Episode 1 – Marketing communication and maintaining brand relevance (11 views)
- Episode 2 – The importance of associate/employee engagement and having a seat at the table where decisions are made (57 views)
- Episode 3 – Owning a small communication business, why innovation is important for business, and why communicators should spark new ideas for their companies/organizations (48 views)

Budget and COVID-19 Challenges

MASTERMINDS SESSION

We originally budgeted \$650 for the Masterminds Session, hoping to attract up to 10 communications leaders. It was set at a venue that also enabled us to have a team-building cooking demonstration. The budget included food, meeting materials, and gifts for participation. Actual participation by area communications leaders was seven.

Because this was a chapter strategy session (not a member meeting), only a small representation of our board members attended to gather the input for our program planning. Our actual costs came to \$568.30.

CHAPTER PROGRAMS & COVID-19

Before COVID, we planned for four programs during the second half of our 2019-2020 program year, at least one per month as follow-up to our Masterminds event. The professional development programs were to be planned on a simple income-expense model, based on venue, supplies, and breakfast or lunch meals. The first program (March 2020) was budgeted at only \$100 for a light menu and a no-cost meeting room. We collected \$265 in registration fees and our actual cost for food was \$96.72.

When the full impact of the pandemic was realized, including remote working and limited social interaction, we made the strategic decision to offer our programs virtually, at no cost to members. Our decision included two major considerations:

- We have a very healthy reserve that was more than adequate to absorb the effects of a health crisis on our members and we could accommodate minimal costs, if any.
- We needed to maintain our value to our membership and maximize member retention when many were facing potential job loss or COVID-19 infection, difficulty in assisting extended family members in need, and in many cases the added responsibilities of home schooling.

We also carried the Masterminds theme of topics into our three professional development programs in the first half of our 2020-2021 program year.

Our only chapter cost was for a Zoom account for chapter meetings: \$320.79. The Zoom account is also used for board meetings, informal networking events, etc. No registration fees were collected for the virtual professional development programs and the only other expense was for three books (total \$22.77) as door prizes for the June program.

Implementation

The Masterminds Session and growing concerns about COVID-19 influenced our program strategy to include the following major themes:

- Embrace the IABC focus to Advance the Profession, Create Connection, and Develop Strategic Communicators.
- Be relevant in a complex world and provide ways for members to Learn, Help, and Meet (a key learning from the 2018 Leadership Institute)
- Maximize the value of our programming by addressing as many points of input from our communication leaders as possible

These are the chapter programs we presented to meet our objectives:

HEAVY CONVERSATION: LET'S FACE IT (MARCH 2020)

One of the learnings from our Masterminds session was the need to provide programming on crisis communications. We convened a communication crisis panel to answer the question: How do you gain communication experience in something you hope never happens? It included an interactive, networking environment with expert panel of consultants and corporate leaders. We also held a mock scenario for attendees to work together and present how they would approach the issue.

Elements of the interactive program included:

- Developing a look back at recent high-profile crisis communications that were ineffective, with headlines and recaps for attendees to recall and discuss the news
- Assigning a crisis event to each attendee table and having them assume the role of communications leads of the respective companies; then, based on what they learned from the panel, asking them how they would handle it under one of three scenarios: media call, employee outreach, or C-suite message

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF YOUR CONTENT STRATEGY (MAY 2020)

To provide a content strategy event we partnered with the IABC Houston chapter president Austin Staton to present Strategies to Make Content Work Across Communication Channels. The program helped attendees find effective ways to repurpose content and get the most out of it with limited resources. This would address Masterminds feedback on business value and strategic thinking.

Following an introduction on content strategy and development by Austin, attendees broke out into small discussion groups to share content challenges and brainstorm ways to plan for multi-purpose content across departments and organizations. This was followed up by a wrap-up from Austin and Q&A.

GAME CHANGERS REWRITE THE PLAYBOOK (JUNE 2020)

We gathered local professionals from communications and other fields to share how they are learning and adapting personal, professional, and technical skills during this new and evolving era.

First, three keynote speakers addressed the importance of recognizing and responding to personal and social needs: staying productive (personal development); navigating uncertainty and unrest (on the heels of George Floyd's death and rising protests); and creating a spark (employee engagement). Then attendees were invited to participate in one of several breakout sessions:

- Fundraising – How to stay relevant, resourceful, and resilient in uncertain times
- Recruiting – Eying talent from a distance
- Tradeshows/Customer Meetings – Connecting with customers: Sharing your products and services through virtual trade show and customer meetings

The program ended with a final recap and Q&A with the speakers. Also, during the event we recorded our six speakers providing a summary of their comments on communication, innovation, and conviction (29 views).

Note: With the ongoing pandemic, we continued our virtual programming strategy along with our commitment to value and relevancy objectives in the first half of our 2020-2021 program year.

KEEPING AN EYE ON EQ: A "WHODUNIT" LUNCHTIME EVENT (SEPTEMBER 2020)

To help communicators learn ways to explore their emotional quotient (EQ), despite having limited in-person time, two speakers made brief presentations on concrete actions to increase trust, rapport, and the influence of equity; and to enhance listening, empathy, and belonging. Then, attendees were presented with a scenario of an errant email message. The speakers asked questions that led participants to "solve" what went wrong and why, and how they would handle it.

HOW RC3 IS REDUCING COVID'S COMMUNICATION COMPLEXITIES (OCTOBER 2020)

RC3 is the Regional COVID Communications Center, launched by the Cincinnati Chamber and The Health Collaborative. The lead of this ongoing campaign shared cultural and equitable information about COVID-19 prevention, community

spread, testing, and related topics. Our objective was to share the message that while we continue to navigate this new territory, consistent and accurate communication was the primary tool we have to help others make better decisions.

This was a more “traditional” virtual presentation, but the speaker – who is a chapter member and leading the RC3 communications – delivered messages that couldn’t have been more relevant for professional communicators. She shared how the RC3 initiative helps turn complicated messages into concise communications and inspires people to hear, listen, and act.

THE DECENCY CODE (NOVEMBER 2020)

The final professional development program of 2020 was The Decency Code: The Leader’s Path to Building Integrity and Trust, featuring James E. Lukaszewski (based on his book by the same title). Our focus was on how integrity and trust are critical for communicators.

Jim’s topics for this virtual program included what “decency” looks like, why moving to a better life every day outperforms fighting indecency, and how to incorporate The Decency Code into the work culture.

We did experience a registration issue that prevented some from getting the link to the session. Fortunately, we were able to share with registrants the presentation slides, a recording of the event, and the 27-page detailed handout.

Measurement

Attendance for these professional development programs ranged between 15 and 35. It is not helpful to compare the attendance to the prior, pre-pandemic year because of the new demands on time and attention. For example, registration was often higher for each meeting, but the new demands resulted in scheduling conflicts for our attendees. (The no-cost registration gave registrants a break if they needed to meet other last-minute work or home commitments.)

We used brief surveys to get reaction and feedback from attendees. They included one rating question and three open-ended questions.

Results

At the start of 2020, our initial goal was to establish new relationships with communication leaders and make our programming more relevant to the needs of those leaders, their teams, and our attendees. The Masterminds Session was very successful in getting diverse perspectives to guide our planning. We then turned to creating a program schedule that delivered those relevant programs.

We had a limited number of survey responses from our programs, but they were overwhelmingly positive in both ratings and comments, including:

- “I appreciate the chapter finding local communicators we can learn from regularly.”
- “I really liked the more conversational format.”
- “I liked the idea of how to foster respect and how to be more resilient.”

We learned much from our Masterminds Session and programming strategy, including the benefits of diverse formats, topics, and presenters. Creative themes with virtual interaction generated many positive reactions and comments following the programs. We quickly changed our format to virtual after our March 2020 event, and we ensured the final two programs zeroed in on relevance for the end of 2020 – COVID vaccination communications and the Decency Code.

While the few negative comments and suggestions for improvement from the surveys focused more on technical glitches or on issues that we had no control over, we did learn that free and virtual meetings also meant less of a commitment to attend. For example, 50 registered for the Game Changers event – an extraordinary number for us – but 33 attended. Other events had similar results. We did begin recording events, which should improve the reach of our efforts to ensure the relevance of our existing and prospective members in the communications profession. And we are learning that sometimes, people sign up for events knowing that even if they cannot attend due to a last-minute conflict, they may still be privy to the post-event resources because of their registration email.

Work Samples

1. Staying Relevant in a Complex World ([Video Episode #3](#)): Owning a small communication business, why innovation is important for business, and why communicators should spark new ideas for their companies/organizations
2. Sample promotions of three of the professional development programs