



## Overview

Toronto is one of the largest cities in Canada and has a diverse economy covering large public and private corporations, small businesses and non-profit organizations in the health care, financial services, government, education, consumer products and technology sectors. IABC/Toronto has almost 1,100 members across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) metropolis and they work in a variety of disciplines: public and media relations, corporate communications, employee communications, public affairs, investor relations, marketing communications, graphic design, website development and social media. Key facts about our members:

- 85% are working professionals and of these 26% are corporate members
- 25% work for some type of corporation and 13% work in agency
- 27% are at the manager level and another third are directors and senior executives

### *Purpose and goals for 2017-2018:*

We started the board year by defining our purpose:

*“IABC/Toronto exists to create connection between professionals in the brand, marketing and communication functions and the broader business community to elevate our profession. We convene thought leaders with a unique and relevant point of view to facilitate learning and development opportunities for our community, our volunteers and our board.”*

Our overarching goals for the year were to:

- Keep our Purpose at the heart of all we do
- Be transparent and open with our stakeholders
- Maintain our financial health with a view to long-term sustainability

All portfolios were asked to align their plan to the purpose and overarching goals.

## Events Strategy

### *Background*

The chapter strongly believes that in-person events deliver the most value at a local level and provide the greatest opportunity to “create connection”, in keeping with the IABC brand values. These events also demonstrate the diversity of our community. The chapter organizes events through several portfolios, each with a specific purpose and audience. From professional development to network to special interest groups, our events are designed to serve the needs of both broad and niche audience segments that reside and work in the GTA, home to more than 6 million people.

### *Developing the 2017-2018 events approach*

At the start of the board year, we conducted a survey as part of the first President’s Message to understand what members and non-members were looking for from the chapter. Our in-person events typically attract more non-members than members (63% non-member attendees in the 2016-17 board year). Therefore, we wanted to collect feedback from the broader communication community to make our programming relevant for all.

In the survey we asked a specific question to gauge interest in a list of IABC/Toronto programs and events. Survey respondents expressed interest in the following:

- 79%: in-person PD sessions and workshops
- 65%: networking events
- 50%: events for special interest groups (independent communicators)
- 51%: OVATION Awards Gala

Keeping these survey results in mind, our events strategy was to focus our efforts primarily on in-person events as the primary way to bring our purpose of being a convener of likeminded peers to life, and to achieve our financial goals by attracting more non-members to attend through relevant programming.

### *Guiding principles*

Our chapter events strategy was guided by the below principles:

#### Economic sustainability

- Strive for revenue generation and cost-recovery on events (break-even).
- Contribute positively to the chapter's economic sustainability for 2017-2018.

#### Excellence in Member engagement

- Deliver strong execution in events with a consideration for member experience.
- Drive event planning through member surveys and feedback.

#### Diversity and inclusion:

- Provide learning opportunities in a range of disciplines.
- Ensure diverse representation on all panels (no all-male/all-white panels).

### *Events structure*

The chapter organizes various types of events, from professional development to networking and award ceremonies, through different portfolios. In the past, we often had portfolios competing with each other as well as with external events for share of wallet. The Executive Committee set an expectation at Strategic Planning session that all portfolio vice presidents needed to “connect the dots” between their individual portfolios and present a cohesive programming schedule. The rationale for this approach was based on applying the audience lens: that attendees see all events as being organized by the IABC/Toronto brand rather than by an individual portfolio. The main event-based portfolios and their mandates are provided below.

#### Events:

- Organizes professional development and networking events, from concept to execution, that drive attendance and provide strong value for membership.
- Prepare all appropriate content (event description, venue info, speaker images and bios, ticket pricing, etc.) and work with the Office and Communication portfolio to promote events.
- Survey attendees to evaluate event effectiveness and analyze results to find opportunities to enhance future events.

#### Special Interest Groups:

- Oversee the chapter's current special interest groups – PIC and Westend – ensuring that their activities deliver member value and are aligned with the chapter's strategy.

- Explore creation of other special interest groups for the chapter, as needed.

#### OVATION Awards:

- Manage an effective, timely chapter awards program that adds value to the members' experience by offering them an opportunity to gain recognition for excellence in the communications profession.
- Oversee the OVATION Gala with the support of a Senior Director, building on the successes and learning from previous years' events to meet attendees' needs.

#### Programs:

- Oversee execution of chapter awards programs: Communicator of the Year and Student of the Year, including promotions and working with the board to identify opportunities to grow the programs.
- Plan, execute and evaluate an event to recognize the Communicator of the Year recipient.

#### Volunteer Services:

- Organize a volunteer recruitment event in September and a volunteer recognition event in June of each year or work with President to combine this event with the Annual General Meeting.

### **Implementation**

#### *Target audience*

Five to six years ago, the chapter had success with events targeting niche audiences like students, recent graduates and senior communicators. However, declining attendance at these targeted events over time and rising costs in downtown Toronto meant that we couldn't offer such events in a cost-effective manner. In keeping with our goal for financial sustainability, for the Events and Programs portfolios we prioritized events that would appeal to a broader audience and help us break even, which was usually at the 50 attendees mark.

However, because of the diversity of our membership and our large geographic region, we also had to consider how we would serve the needs of other communication professionals that might not want to come downtown. Or even those that are independent communicators and are looking to connect with their peers. Therefore, our Special Interests Group portfolio was responsible for organizing events aimed at independents through its Professional Independent Communicators (PIC) group, and for networking events targeting professional communicators living in the north, east and west ends of the Greater Toronto Area.

For the OVATION Awards Gala, the primary audience is award winners, majority of whom are from agency and the rest from corporates. The goal of the Gala is to deliver a memorable experience to that audience by celebrating their efforts in a way that makes them feel valued and special.

We also try to attract more non-members to our events as there is a price differential that allows us to collect more revenue while offsetting lower prices for members. This is to show the value of membership and also to subsidize member-only initiatives like volunteer recruitment and recognition events.

#### *Event planning*

We conduct feedback surveys after each event and one of the questions asked is around future topics of interest. The feedback from the previous board year is shared with new board members/portfolio VPs to help them with event planning and to provide them with insights on what has worked and what hasn't.

Funnel, our association management company, has worked with the chapter for over 20 years. At the start of the board year, they meet with all new board members individually to share best practices from previous years and provide guidance on how to plan events for the chapter.

In a large city like Toronto, we are competing for share of wallet and share of interest from other associations like the Canadian PR Society, Toronto chapter and the Canadian Marketing Association, as well other industry conferences. We make our best effort to avoid major conflicts by maintaining a chapter calendar that includes internal and external events as well as holidays and special occasions. Funnel, has ownership of the chapter calendar and shares it with the entire board every two weeks. We also discuss upcoming events at monthly board meetings so that all VPs are aware of what's happening and when.

#### *Pricing strategy*

Our pricing strategy is to have a large differential (\$15 to \$20) between member and non-member pricing as a way to demonstrate member value. We also offer early-bird and regular pricing. In addition, all events had to be priced to break even, with the exception of the OVATION Gala which had an objective to deliver net profit. Volunteer events were free for members and volunteers, but we charged a ticket price for any non-members that wanted to attend.

In the previous board years, Special Interest Group events were offered free of charge and subsidized by other chapter programs. However, given the goal of financial sustainability it was important that these events generate enough revenue to cover venue costs. Because independent communicators are usually small business owners, the PIC group did not want to charge a high ticket price. Therefore, it was agreed with the chapter Executive that PIC networking events and other networking events in the north, west and east ends of the city would be offered as a "pay your own way" in local bars with no cost to the chapter. But, there would be a small ticket price (\$15 members; \$25 non-members) for professional development events where the chapter would incur venue rental fee.

#### *Marketing our events*

The chapter promotes all events through multiple channels:

- e-Lert biweekly newsletter (4,050+ subscribers)
- Chapter website home page and events page (1,050+ visits per month)
- Facebook company page (980 followers)
- LinkedIn company page (848 followers)
- Twitter (10,000 followers)
- Dedicated email promotion (4,050+ subscribers)
- Mention of upcoming activities at chapter events

Our analysis of post-event surveys and registration data shows that e-Lert and email is the most effective channel for driving ticket sales, followed by word of mouth and the chapter website. While social media is great for creating awareness, the click-thrus from social media don't drive sales. As a result of this, we promote all PD events in at least two issues of e-Lert and one dedicated email; the latter is usually used for "last call to register" type communication. This is supported by ongoing social media promotions scheduled as soon as the event goes live on the website. Either the Communications portfolio volunteer or Funnel prepares creative and visually-appealing event banners for use on our digital channels.

## Goals, objectives and measurement

Each portfolio set its SMART objectives and measures of success, but the expectation was to align these objectives to the overall chapter goal of maintaining our financial health with a view to long-term sustainability. Each portfolio uses the previous year's results as the benchmark for goal setting.

Portfolio	Objectives	Results
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain 80% positive review rate in post-event surveys.</li> <li>• Support the chapter's financial sustainability by ensuring the events portfolio recovers all costs for events on an annualized basis.</li> <li>• Maintain overall attendance levels from following year – (150 attendees over the course of the year)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivered 5 events with all except one operating at break even.</li> <li>• Total of 328 attendees for the year at in-person PD events; 42% members and 58% non-members.</li> <li>• All of our events achieved 80% positive rating with two events getting 90% positive.</li> </ul>
Professional Independent Communicators (PIC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate revenue from PD events and deliver cost-effective programming.</li> <li>• Maintain attendance of 120 attendees for the year.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PIC organized five PD events that were well attended (123 total attendees for the year) and generated \$1,735 in revenue.</li> <li>• While PIC events didn't break even, PIC was able to deliver cost-effective programming by using a low-cost venue.</li> </ul>
Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain attendance of at least 90 attendees.</li> <li>• Deliver at least \$4,500 in revenue, using the previous year's budget as a benchmark.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The selection of a senior executive with experience in business and sports meant that attendees got to hear a different leadership perspective.</li> <li>• The COTY breakfast had 108 attendees (45% members; 55% non-members).</li> <li>• According to the post-event survey, 60% of attendees had more than 13 years of experience in communication.</li> <li>• The event generated over \$5,400 in revenue.</li> <li>• The honoree's speech received 85% "high satisfaction" rating.</li> </ul>
OVATION Awards Gala	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce more networking activities in order to increase satisfaction from 28% fair in 2017 to greater than 30% excellent in 2018.</li> <li>• Introduce new or enhanced opportunities to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased satisfaction ratings from post-event survey for the following metrics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ powerpoint presentation (increased rating from 51% excellent/good in 2017 to 90% excellent/good in 2018)</li> <li>✓ networking opportunities (increased rating from 66% excellent/good in 2017 to 70% excellent/good in 2018)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<p>profile winners during the event including the printed program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ printed program (increased rating from 74% excellent/good in 2017 to 80% excellent/good in 2018)</li> <li>• Maintained satisfaction ratings from post-event survey for remaining metrics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Increased overall satisfaction from 86% excellent/good in 2017 to 96% excellent/good rating in 2018</li> <li>✓ Increased rating for exceeded/met expectations from 91% in 2017 to 98% in 2018</li> <li>✓ Maintained excellent rating at 55% for Master of Ceremonies</li> <li>✓ Increased excellent/good rating for event theme from 75% in 2017 to 85% in 2018</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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*Results:*

During the 2017-2018 board year, IABC/Toronto organized 33 events. We had a total of 824 attendees, of which 57% were non-members and 43% were members. A full list of events and breakdown of audience is provided in the work sample. While we did not meet all of our revenue targets for events, we did deliver a profit by controlling expenses and optimizing spend with a focus on value and attendee experience.

**Challenges**

*Delayed programming start*

The VP, Events was new to the board this year and started a new job shortly after joining the board. This resulted in a delay in starting our programming for the year and we weren't able to plan or promote events too far in advance. We knew at the mid-year point that we wouldn't meet our event revenue, so we focused on optimizing spend in the second-half of the year by reducing expenses related to the OVATION Awards Gala and cutting back non-essential spend in other portfolios.

*Securing sponsorship support*

This was difficult to achieve this year, despite considerable committee volunteer time and effort. Part of the improvement may require approaching organizations earlier in their budget/planning cycle (ideally they need at least 12 months advance notice.) In addition, the Cision sponsorship grant/bursary offered through the IABC Canada East Region expired on December 31, 2017 and we were told in February 2018 that it would not be renewed.

*Lack of volunteers*

We had trouble recruiting volunteers for the Events portfolio and for the OVATION Gala, plus a few volunteers dropped out at the last minute. As a result, several board members jumped in to provide on-site support at the Gala as well one of them took on the planning for a PD event so that the VP could focus on getting the next one organized in advance.

*Declining attendance at networking events*

The networking events organized by the Special Interest Groups didn't prove as popular as we had thought they would be. The initial events were relatively successful, but subsequent ones saw sharp decline in attendance. The model of these events was "pay your own way", which meant that registrants

didn't always feel obligated to attend in order to recoup a ticket price. There was also feedback that these could be more structured to facilitate networking rather than a get together for drinks.

## Budget

### *Budget process*

- Each board member was required to develop a strategic plan for his or her portfolio with an accompanying budget. That budget identified the expenses, revenues, office hours and sponsorship dollars that would successfully support their strategic goals. To get some insight in making those financial estimates for the year ahead, they refer to the actual costs and revenue from the previous year.
- The VP, Finance and Association Management reviewed individual portfolio budgets. For the portfolios that had events, the expectation was set that all events must break even at a minimum and generate revenue, if possible.
- Since we had a sizeable surplus from the year previous (\$33,242), we felt comfortable budgeting for a loss in 2017-18. Given that the chapter had not invested in various chapter activities over the past few years, we felt the time was right to focus on enhancing and updating our member-based initiatives and other programs to enhance member value.
- Volunteer Services did have small budget, but because these events were meant to be a value-add for members, so the expenses were subsidized by the surplus funds.

### *Budget breakdown and analysis*

Each events-based portfolio had its own budget with line items for specific elements such as venue rental, AV, food and beverage, ticket revenue, etc. The VP, Finance and Association Management worked with all portfolios to help them understand how to create their event pricing that would deliver budgeted revenue and to manage their expenses to be cost effective. Below is a breakdown showing budget vs. actual.

Portfolio	Budgeted Revenue	Actual Revenue	Budgeted Expense	Actual Expense
Events	\$20,000	\$15,505.70	\$26,000	\$12,380.64
Programs	\$4,000	\$5,492.50	\$5,000	\$5,454.16
Special Interest Groups	\$2,700	\$1,735	\$2,775	\$1,633.26
OVATION Gala	\$73,000	\$72,926.10	\$71,500	\$56,729.41
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$99,700</b>	<b>\$95,659.30</b>	<b>\$105,275</b>	<b>\$76,197.47</b>

*Budgeted Loss (Revenue less Expenses): \$5,575*

*Actual Net Profit (Revenue less Expenses): \$19,461.83*

Despite the challenges faced, by keeping a tight control over our event expenses, we were able to deliver a net profit of \$19,461.83 from event-related activities.