

LEADERSHIP PAGE



College Communications

Making the Illusion a Reality



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George Bernard Shaw is often cited for the quote: “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place” (1). Indeed, as the American College of Cardiology (ACC) endeavors to engage, inform, and educate a growing membership via traditional and innovative communication vehicles, it may appear to the average member that adequate, if not over-abundant, communication already takes place. However, given the rapid growth and expansion of social media and other digital channels, there is also the unintended consequence of creating a deluge of information that can render communication less valuable.

Recognizing the need to optimize communications from the College, the ACC Board of Trustees in 2018 under the guidance of then President **C. Michael Valentine, MD, MACC**, established a Communications Task Force with the goal of analyzing challenges, improving efficiencies, and ensuring communications are as smart, effective, and/or actionable as possible. Thanks to the work of **B. Hadley Wilson, MD, FACC**, **Daniel José Piñero, MD, FACC**, **Michael J. Mack, MD, FACC**, **Robert C. Hendel, MD, FACC**, **Mary Norine Walsh, MD, MACC**, and **Akhil Narang, MD**, as well as ACC Executive Vice President **Brendan J. Mullen**, ACC Chief Communications Officer **Shalen K. Fairbanks**, and ACC Chief Digital Officer **Steve Kerchner**, the task force came away with the following findings and recommendations:

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

DO WE BECOME MORE DISENGAGED WITH INCREASED E-MAILS? Although seemingly intuitive, data from the ACC and other sources demonstrate that this is not the case. Analysis of ACC informational and marketing e-mail open rates suggest that there is a 1 in 4 chance that the e-mail is read; this does not increase with diminishing volume, nor does it decrease with increasing volume (unpublished data, ACC, August 13, 2019). We as leaders and

members need to understand that a volume relationship does indeed exist, just as ACC staff need to recognize that there may be alternative forms of communication media to maximize information dissemination and uptake. The high burden of product marketing e-mails was of particular concern.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE IN COMMUNICATION PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN MEMBER GROUPS?

Clearly, there is a generational shift. Mid- to late-career members, who predominate ACC leadership positions, still heavily rely on e-mail, whereas many younger, early career cardiovascular professionals, including fellows-in-training, use social media, texting, and other mobile apps as their primary and preferred communication method. Additionally, the modern member may be more relaxed about communication style, and be more open to informed humor, informal communication, and information teasers, even from a professional society. These competing channels and priorities need to be addressed cohesively.

AMAZON SEEMS TO BE ABLE TO PERSONALIZE MARKETING/E-MAILS, WHY CAN WE NOT?

A rudimentary data analysis of our e-mail traffic patterns did not yield any factor(s) that seemed to predict e-mail volume. Modeling performed on existing data also did not suggest that modest investment into additional artificial intelligence or machine learning would be of significant assistance. This would need to be further explored through digital transformation of the College data enterprise.

SHORT-TERM TACTICAL WINS

The Communications Task Force identified 3 strategies for increasing communications effectiveness while managing the burden of volume. The collective goal of the strategies is to communicate the most information possible at the lowest level of perceived burden.

1. *Consolidation and elimination where possible.* Multiple high-volume e-mail streams are burdensome for members and technically challenging for staff to manage. For that reason, efforts are being redoubled to consolidate e-mail vehicles, combining better, high-priority information in fewer messages. For example, the ACC is reducing some marketing e-mails in favor of placing the marketing messages as advertorials, or even direct advertising, within information e-mails.
2. *Focused messages, focused mediums.* For specific groups within the ACC, we are piloting dedicated information feeds distributed both on traditional (e-mail and website) and novel (social media, text, and apps) platforms. We think targeted content presented in a stylistically appealing or edgy format, while simultaneously reducing nonrelevant content, will increase engagement among members.
3. *Pivot to social media and beyond.* Social media is quickly becoming the cardiovascular professional's communication medium of choice. E-mail is perceived as corporate, boring, obligatory, and "so 2008," whereas social media is perceived as fresh and flashy. The challenge is that informational flow in social media is more akin to random biopsies, especially for the casual user, increasing the likelihood that content felt to be critical may be missed.
2. *Pilot special communications track for fellows-in-training/early career cardiologists within the first 5 years of membership.* Given how radically the next generation of cardiovascular professionals envision and utilize technology and communications, we will dedicate substantial resources to understanding these relationships. This strategy will essentially insulate the fellow-in-training/early career member from other ACC communications channels and rebuild a messaging and communications experience dedicated to their lived reality and preferences. In this context, we will experiment with channel mix, information density, tone, and platform.
3. *Re-envision the relationship between editorial content and marketing.* Traditionally, the college has largely separated the marketing of programs of programs and products from informational/editorial content. The ACC Communications and Marketing teams will continue to explore opportunities for greater synergies without loss of content or impact, thereby reducing the volume of communication.
4. *Exploration of advanced computational targeting algorithms.* Personalization and targeting of communication is possible with artificial intelligence and machine learning, and options will be explored with current and new vendors.

These short-term tactics have resulted in consolidation of multiple member section newsletters into the weekly ACC Update e-mail; relaunching a redesigned Fellows-in-Training and Early Career newsletter; increased use of short videos and Facebook Live streamings at live meetings and events; greater use of graphics/videos and "punchier" vernacular on Twitter; and additional investments in social media infrastructure.

LONG-TERM COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

What does the future hold? What additional investments can be made in long-term pilots, projects, and strategies? Here are 5 postulations from the Task Force:

1. *Members have the power of choice.* Unbeknownst to many, every ACC member currently has a fair amount of control over informational flow through their ACC.org profile. Additional measures to tailor content, regulate volume, and opt-in for channels will be considered in the next year and beyond.

5. *Custom e-mail tailoring for ACC leadership.* ACC leaders receive an inordinate amount of e-mail, with >80% of leadership receiving more e-mail than the average member (excluding interpersonal or professional e-mail for official business). By reducing the e-mail burden on leaders, we can test out the "sweet spot" of where the balance of too little and too much e-mail truly lies.

These are welcome challenges, and the future for the College and its members is bright indeed. As we embark on enacting this new direction, it is becoming increasingly apparent that member communications, like other functionalities of the College, will benefit tremendously from a re-engineered digital transformation strategy. Whether via e-mail or Twitter, stay tuned!

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