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Prof. Kinsey,

I am submitting to you, as my final research project for the Public Relations and Public Opinion Research course, my analysis from a survey on IABC programming for senior communicators.

This report is the result of my organizational theory that this global professional development association may not be addressing the programming needs of its senior communicators. The results from the online survey that I launched with a sampling of members from three of the largest chapters in the United States are revealing.

My hope is that the survey will not only serve as an indication of my ability to conduct such research but also that it provides insightful, useful results that can be reviewed and acted upon by participating IABC chapters.

Please let me know if you have questions or need additional information.

Regards,

John G. Clemons, ABC, APR

**What Seniors Want:
IABC Programming for Senior Communicators**

Final Research Project

John G. Clemons, ABC, APR

Public Relations and Public Opinion Research
ISDP/Communications Management
Dennis F. Kinsey, Ph.D.
May 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research report, *What Seniors Want: IABC Programming for Senior Communicators*, is based on the results from a brief survey of International Association of Business Communicators members (IABC) who volunteered to participate and share largely quantitative input on programming for senior communicators.

Founded in 1970, The International Association of Business Communicators provides a professional network of over 15,500 business communication professionals in over 80 countries. It is recognized as one of the premier organizations focused on professional communications which encompasses public relations, internal or organizational communications, writing, editing, public affairs, marketing communications, community relations, graphic design, social media and other related functions. It has more than 100 chapters and continues to serve as an advocate for communications as a strategic, valuable function, and a resource for information and best practices in communications.

I have been a member of IABC for more than 20 years, having served as a volunteer officer on local chapters in Atlanta and Tampa, international board member and chairman from 2001 to 2002. Leading the organization provided me with an opportunity to not only assist in the hiring its current president, Julie Freeman, but also to work closely with her during IABC's major financial crisis several years ago.

These experiences served as the basis for the organizational theory that programming for senior communicators could possibly be improved.

The report that follows includes results from a survey sent to 20 members from three of the largest IABC chapters – Washington, DC, Chicago and Houston (**Appendix A**). During the month of April, the participants answered and/or commented on 12 survey questions or statements on programming for senior communicators that were posted in the Survey Monkey online survey tool. Details on how survey participants were selected appears later in the report.

According to Stacks (2002), "The advantages to the Internet survey lie in the speed in which it is returned and the fact that the data can be directly inputted into statistical or spreadsheet packages for data analysis."

The overall response rate from the potential participant pool of 60 total members was 73 percent (44 members from the three chapters), with the highest response count of 19 members from the Washington, DC, chapter. Nearly 40 percent of all participants have been a member of IABC for "more than 20 years".

Twenty-five percent of the respondents were either a president, principal or CEO of a business or communications firm/consultancy, followed by 15.9 percent who listed their job title as director. A little more than 61 percent have been professional communicators for more than 20 years, and nearly 30 percent have 15 to 20 years of experience in the profession. Based on these demographics, it appears that the majority of survey respondents can be considered senior communicators.

Survey results indicate that respondents are almost split evenly on the association's ability to effectively develop and provide senior programming at the International level (i.e., World Conference, professional development seminars) – 48.7 percent positive vs. 51.2 percent negative. But it is in the IABC regions that more than 66 percent of respondents felt IABC has fallen short on making senior programming available. Fifty-six percent of respondents indicated local chapter programs for senior communicators were accessible and effectively developed.

Not surprisingly, responses from close to 44 percent of participants revealed that they have not attended an IABC program targeted to senior communicators in “25 months or longer.” For many others (24.3 percent), it has been 12 to 24 months. However, of those who attended such programs, 37.8 percent called them good and 16.2 percent thought the programs were excellent. It should also be pointed out that 40 percent chose “not applicable” as their response because, presumably, they have not attended senior programming in a while.

When asked how interested respondents are in preferred areas or categories of programming, several choices were listed: Skills-based/How-to, Best Practices, Communications Theory, Breaking News/Topical, and Other. Best practices and breaking news/topical received the highest responses, 76.1 percent and 61.9 percent respectively. It should be noted that skills-based/how-to category received a low 29.2 percent which indicates that timely, “in the moment” and successful examples of effective communications are preferred by respondents.

Overwhelmingly, 76.1 percent of those who took the survey want to receive senior-focused programming in a “roundtable or open discussion” format, while speaker presentations and conference sessions were also favored by more than half of those surveyed – 53.6 percent for both of these formats.

Another near-even split in feedback occurs on the question, “Would you pay to join an IABC group specifically targeted to senior communicators?” Just over 51 percent would be willing to pay for such programming while almost 49 percent are not. These results are particularly interesting and I surmised that there may be several reasons for the pro and con response percentages, which will be shared later in the report.

Survey participants were also given the opportunity to suggest one-to-three program ideas for senior communicators. Two were repeatedly mentioned: social media and crisis communications, followed by ideas that leaned toward staff management and development, case studies, demonstrating the value of communications/return on investment, and a variety of other suggestions. Among them: “maintaining enthusiasm toward the end of your career, latest trends so I can keep up, and forming professional networks that last.”

The final question was open ended and sought closing comments or thoughts on programming for senior communicators. While there are several comments, a recurring theme is related to time, place and accessibility of senior communicator programs and program formats.

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A. Background and Research Objectives

My interest in the topic of IABC programming for senior communicators is based on years of experience as a volunteer leader in the association – at the chapter and international levels. Senior-level programming is a topic of discussion among my professional colleagues and friends who, like me, consider themselves to be senior communicators.

The survey is the outcome of a desire to test a theory that I have had on the suspected dearth of available IABC programming for senior communicators. Though this research, the intent is to provide a simple and brief, yet noteworthy report with survey results that either support or dispute the programming theory.

Overall, the research objectives are:

- Demonstrate the ability to conduct one of several methods of research using a survey as the primary tool for gathering quantitative results and feedback.
- Test an organizational theory about IABC regarding the development and availability of programming for senior communicators
- Provide actionable results and feedback that may be useful to IABC leaders at the international, regional and chapter levels, and
- Develop a report that could serve as the basis for a more extensive survey or more in-depth research on senior-level programming in the United States and the more than 80 countries where IABC has chapter members.

I would not characterize the development and availability of programming for senior communicators as a “problem.” It could more suitably be portrayed as an opportunity for the professional association to look more closely at its growing niche of senior-level membership and to develop programming specifically for this group.

After reviewing the survey results, I am even more convinced that IABC’s senior communicators a) want more programming for senior communicators, b) would be willing to participate in more high-level programs if available, and c) pay for targeted senior programming on certain topics if offered at the international, regional and chapter levels.

My intent is to share the results of the survey with the presidents of the three chapters who graciously agreed to participate in the survey. These volunteer leaders may disseminate and use the information as they see fit, with the hope that it will help them in the development of new programming. Equally important, is the opportunity to share the survey results with fellow scholars in this Public Relations and Public Opinion course.

B. Methods

Research Design

I designed the survey so that it could be administered via the Internet. Dillman, Smyth & Christian(2009) state that “the use of the Internet as a survey mode has been largely limited to surveying specific populations of interest with high Internet access rates and skill levels, such as members of professional associations, students in universities...and similar targeted groups.

For these populations, Internet surveys can be designed and implemented and results reported faster than with any of the traditional survey modes and often at lower costs” (p. 9).

In addition, the survey development took into consideration several “ways of increasing the benefits of participation” as listed by Dillman, Smyth & Christian (2009):

- Support group values (IABC)
- Provide information about the survey
- Ask for help and advice
- Make the questionnaire interesting
- Inform people that opportunities to respond are limited
- Say thank you

Appealing to people’s helping tendencies or norms of social responsibility can encourage them to respond to the survey (Groves et al., 1992). It is believed that making an appeal for help was particularly helpful in generating the overall 73 percent response rate from survey participants.

The survey was tailored and intentionally kept short and simple to complete. Twelve questions and open-ended comments were carefully crafted to help identify who was taking the survey, how long he or she has been a communicator and the number of years as an IABC member (demographics), followed by targeted questions to gather input on programming for senior communicators.

Sampling

Three of IABC’s largest chapters in the United States were selected to participate in the research project – Washington, DC, Chicago and Houston. It was believed that the members from these chapters would provide a diverse mix of work experience, membership involvement and program input. Twenty members from each chapter could potentially participate in the survey.

Originally, the Minnesota chapter was considered for the survey. However, the timing of this survey coincided with a similar survey to its senior communicators, so the Minnesota chapter could not participate. The Houston chapter was then selected, joining the Washington and Chicago chapters. The brief delay in contacting the Houston chapter meant that the survey would be sent a week later to its members.

Privacy and confidentiality issues surfaced after I sent an introductory cover letter via email to the chapter’s leadership. All three presidents would not disclose the names and email addresses. Instead, the Washington, DC, chapter sent my survey cover letter (**Appendix B**) to 165 of its members – those who have designated themselves as senior communicators. Washington chapter members contacted me regarding their willingness to participate in the survey. .It should also be noted that the Washington chapter has a Senior Communicators Council.

The Chicago and Houston chapters sent my cover letter to selected members. However, these two presidents returned members’ names and email addresses to me, after personally soliciting their participation on my behalf.

Data Collection Procedures

As mentioned earlier, the Survey Monkey online survey tool (www.SurveyMonkey.com) was used to administer the survey to 60 IABC members. In April, a brief explanatory message was distributed and it included a link to the Survey Monkey site. The survey was expected to take 5 to 10 minutes to complete and results were automatically tabulated through the survey tool.

Reminder messages were sent to those who had not completed the survey within the one-to-two week response window.

The survey for the Washington, DC, and Chicago chapters were sent together, and the Houston chapter survey was sent a week later because it was not originally targeted to participate. The survey results were then compiled manually because the Houston chapter received the survey a few days after the Washington and Chicago chapters; response counts and percentages had to be tallied.

Data Analysis

Among several analytical techniques, “pattern matching” (Yin, 2003, p. 116), is considered “one of the most desirable techniques” (p. 116) because it will allow “a way of relating data to the propositions” (p. 27) derived from the survey on programming for senior communicators. This approach is considered to be the most appropriate and effective for this research project.

Through the above data collection procedures of a survey and review of recent chapter programming for the three chapters, there is the expectation that patterns will emerge which support the overarching theory that there is not sufficient IABC programming available for senior communicators. Through “an overall pattern of outcomes” (p. 117), states Yin (2003), “you can draw a solid conclusion about the effects” from the survey.

All of the answers were reviewed and support my theory regarding IABC’s programming. There were higher numbers of responses to questions that focused on the limited availability of senior-level programming, with other high response counts that indicate a need for such programming. As mentioned earlier, there was manual calculation of the percentages and response counts to develop total results that were analyzed and interpreted. The 44 total participants represent a very small subgroup within the global association but the results lead me to believe that the three chapters are unique. Clear, consistent response patterns emerged regarding programming for senior communicators.

C. Findings

The survey results indicate that the 44 of 60 members who responded are desirous of programming at all levels of IABC. The majority of these respondents have not been to a senior-level program in quite some time but it does not mean that they are not interested. They rated the senior-level programs that they had attended in the past as good to excellent, so it is a matter of availability that appears to be the issue.

Also, the areas and categories for such programming are also important to respondents. They are seeking best practices in communications (76.1 percent) and information on timely, topical communication issues (61.9 percent) is preferred. Under Other, 90.9 percent of respondents suggested the following areas or categories: social media and new technologies (5 of 10 written comments) and communication leadership training, research that shows communications ROI, and strategy/communication law were among other comments.

While electronic communications has moved to the forefront as the most accessible and desired form of communicating information to this group of communicators, it is face-to-face communications that ranks highest. Roundtable or open discussions (76.1 percent) and speaker presentations and conference sessions (53.6 percent for both) are the most desired formats for receiving information. Technological delivery systems are next: Online (40 percent), and webinar (31.7). A third electronic format was captured in Other (33.3 percent) – conference calls, podcasts, communities of interest and VTC discussion.

As stated in the Executive Summary, the findings on suggested program topics proved to be very interesting. Nearly all survey participants provided input. Again, social media was at the top of the list, followed by crisis communications.

Survey participants were given the opportunity, in the final question, to share closing thoughts or comments on programming for senior communicators. The majority of the comments centered on the time, place and accessibility of program sessions while stressing the importance of having them.

D. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am pleased with the results of the survey which underscore my organizational theory about IABC programming for senior communicators. While less than one percent of the total membership of 15,000 participated in this research project, some conclusions can be drawn for more extensive research:

- Senior communicators are interested in programming that goes beyond how-to/tactical information. Programs should be focused on best practice communications.
- Face-to-face programs featuring presentations by speakers and open discussion with other communicators serve as the most favored formats to share professional information.

- There is an opportunity for local IABC chapters to capitalize on the programming needs of its senior communicators – but they are not completely supportive of paying more for such programs.
- There is still very high interest in social media as a communications tool. Also, given the volatility of the global economic situation, communicators' interest in crisis communications is peaking, and
- Communicators remain interested in staying ahead of the learning curve in the professional communications field.

I will be sharing the results of the survey with the three chapter presidents for their consideration in future program planning. In addition, I hope to present the findings to the Washington, DC, chapter members in an upcoming chapter meeting and personally thank them for support and their willingness to participate in the survey.

E. References

Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D., Christian, L.M. (2009). *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys – The Tailored Design Method*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Stacks, D.W. (2002). *Primer of Public Relations Research*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Yin, R.K. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

F. Appendices

- A. Survey questions, response percentages and response counts from SurveyMonkey online survey tool (**NOTE:** Separate email attachment)
 - Comments from Question #12: Do you have any closing thoughts or comments on programming for senior communicators?
- B. Introductory letter from me to the chapter presidents to get their support and members' names and emails for participation.

APPENDIX B

Fellow Communicators:

I am currently enrolled as a graduate student in Syracuse University's Masters in Communications Management Program, with expected graduation in 2010. I am writing to request your assistance. As part of my PR Research class, I have opted to develop a survey. I want to target 25 IABC members each from three of the largest chapters in the United States. The Washington chapter is, as you know, one of them.

The survey topic is IABC programming for senior communicators. There will be 7 to 10 questions regarding senior-level programming. Unfortunately, I am constrained by the fast-approaching end of the spring semester, and must send the survey and receive responses during the month of April, then submit my results to my professor within the first week of May.

I hope I can count on your support for my research project. If you want to participate, please let Mike Soroan know by responding to this message. He will provide me with your names and contact information. The survey will be sent to you by early next week. If you have questions or need additional information, I can be reached at jgclemons@aol.com and 703.930.8360 (cell). Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

John G. Clemons, ABC, APR

IABC Washington member

IABC Chairman, 2001-2002

IABC 500 Club