Personify

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN 2021

CREATING A DIGITAL-FIRST APPROACH TO CONNECT WITH MEMBERS, VOLUNTEERS AND ATTENDEES

Digital transformation is a topic that many organizations have discussed for years, but it became incredibly important in 2020. According to Gartner[1], nearly 7 in 10 corporate directors say that the Covid-19 pandemic created an urgent need for organizations to accelerate digitalization efforts. The loss of in-person activities meant that organizations had to quickly spin up digital engagement strategies to meaningfully connect in a virtual-only world.

In December 2020, Personify commissioned research[2] with nearly 1,000 association members and staff. We wanted to understand how organizations have adapted and are continuing to adapt to the pandemic, and the digital engagement strategies they have used to connect with members, and the challenges and opportunities that have arisen.

85%

of organization staff said that the Covid-19 crisis accelerated how quickly they moved to engaging members through digital channels.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

Throughout the Covid-19 crisis, there's been a consistent trend of transitions and pivots to ramp up digital programs to support members, donors, volunteers and more. In our study, 85 percent of organization staff said that the Covid-19 crisis accelerated how quickly they moved to engaging members through digital channels. The good news is that a majority of staff say their organization is much more comfortable engaging members digitally now than before the pandemic.

Members have increased their use of digital as well, but our study found generational differences. Generation Z members were the most likely to report that being able to network with others via digital platforms is an important reason to be part of an association. 52 percent of Gen Z members said that this was "very important," compared to 48% of Millennials, 49% of Gen Xers and 38% of Boomers.
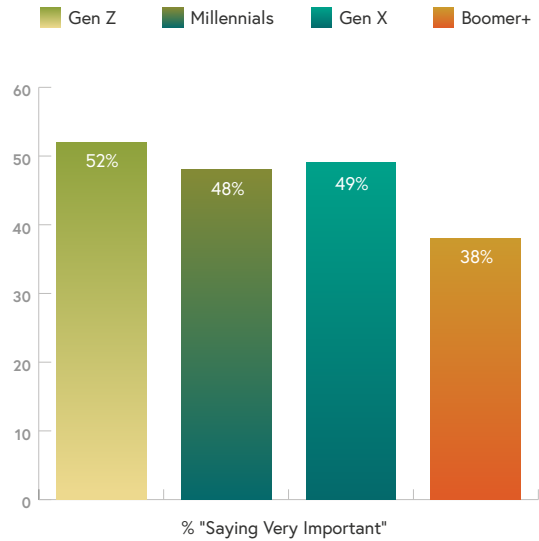
[1] https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/covid-19-accelerates-digital-strategy-initiatives/
[2] https://personifycorp.com/resources/guides/the-journey-ahead-the-future-of-associations-nonprofits-and-events

In fact, digital networking was identified by Gen Z members as the most important reason to be part of an association in 2020. Creating a digital-focused strategy will not only reap benefits while we continue to live with Covid-19 but will also set up your organization to acquire and retain younger members who prefer to engage virtually.

Overall, most members felt that virtual networking has become more important over time, with only 11 percent saying that it had become less important. So, how are organizations creating connections among members and other stakeholders, and which digital channels have been the most effective?

How important is the ability to network with others via digital platforms as a reason to be part of an association?

Legend: Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomer+

Gen Z: 52%
Millennials: 48%
Gen X: 49%
Boomer+: 38%

% "Saying Very Important"

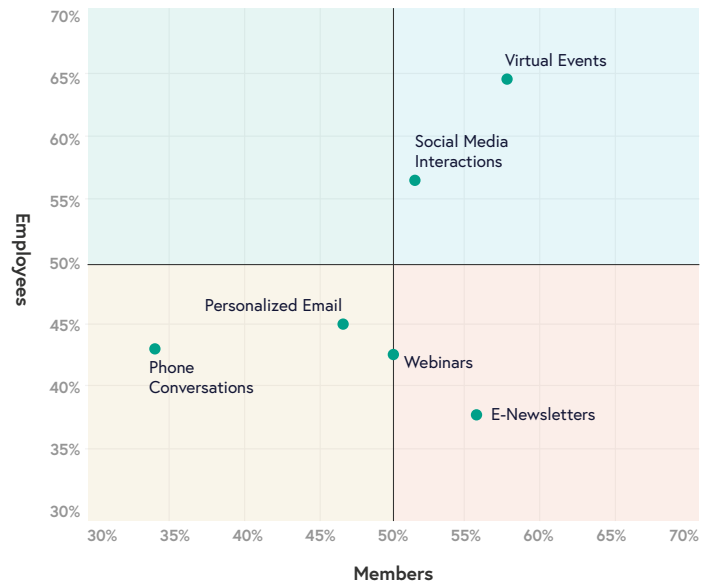# EFFECTIVENESS AND INTEREST DIFFERS ACROSS CHANNELS

As part of the study, we asked employees which channels they had used in 2020 to meaningfully connect with members and then asked members which channels that they use to consume content from their association in 2020. The results revealed some interesting surprises.

Both virtual events and social media were viewed by association members and staff as being highly effective channels in 2020. Virtual events came in as the top channel for each group, with 65% of staff saying their organization hosted virtual events and 58% of members saying that they attended one or more events. This should provide some reassurance for staff that have struggled to transition their events to virtual. While you may have misgivings about the value of virtual events compared to your previous in-person offerings, your members unequivocally shared that they have been valuable and that they are interested in virtual event options going forward, even when the pandemic is over.

Communications in 2020: Employees vs. Members

Employees: Which of the following have you done more of this year in an attempt to make meaningful connections with your association members?
Members: Which of the following have you consumed this year from your association?

Employees

Virtual Events
Social Media Interactions
Personalized Email
Phone Conversations
Webinars
E-Newsletters

Members

Our results also revealed areas of opportunity that organizations may want to lean-in on going forward. While 56% of members report reading e-newsletters more often in 2020 from their association, only 37% of staff say they used this channel more often to connect with members in 2020. This is also the case for webinars, where half of members attended more webinars in 2020 versus only 42% of staff saying they increased the number of webinars they hosted last year. It may be the case that organizations were already consistently sending out e-newsletters and hosting member-focused webinars, but members did not take full advantage of these channels until last year.

When it comes to social media, our results revealed differences for where members want to engage with their organization. Facebook was chosen as the top social network where members want to be engaged, followed closely by Instagram. Interestingly, the use of Twitter and Snapchat have decreased in popularity, with half or more of respondents saying that they'll use them less or not at all in 2021.

HOW OFTEN TO COMMUNICATE?

Survey respondents were asked how often association members want to receive digital content. In general, employees tended to overestimate the degree to which members want to receive digital content from their association, though about one-in-three members want something each week or more. The sweet spot for communication frequency appears to be somewhere between weekly and monthly, with 81% of members supporting a weekly, twice per month, or monthly communication from their association.

How Often Do You Want to Receive Digital Content from Your Association?
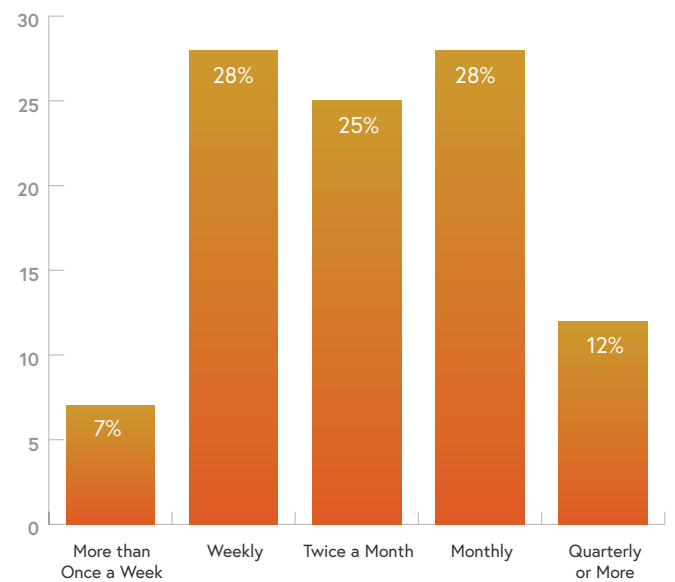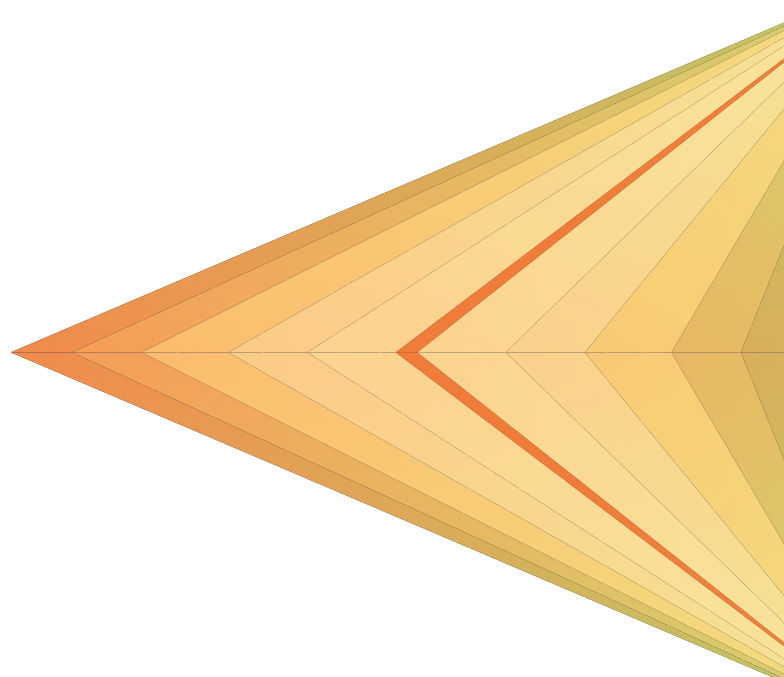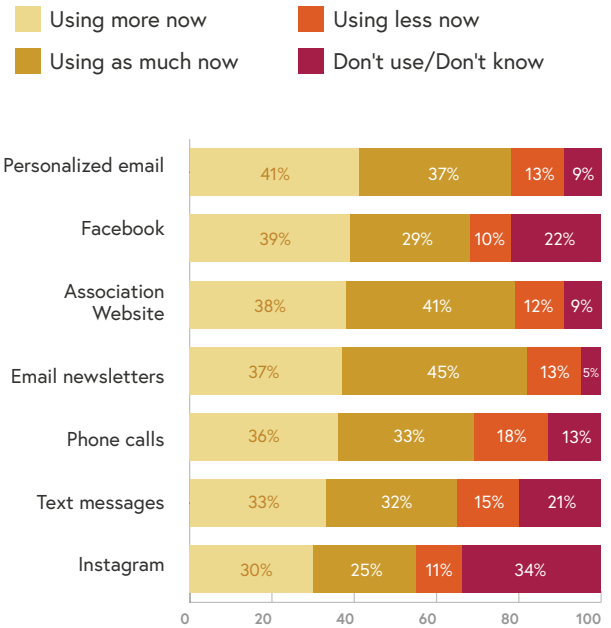
WHAT'S CHANGED OVER THE PAST YEAR

We also asked members and staff which digital channels they used more in 2020 compared to 2019, along with how they want to engage in 2021.

Personalized emails emerged as the top digital channel for members, with 41% saying they consumed more personalized emails in 2020 than in 2019 and 31% who said they would like more personalized emails in 2021. Organization staff said they used personalized email more often in 2020 and plan to use it more in 2021, but this ranked below other channels including Facebook, the association website and text messages. This reveals that there may be a mismatch between association members and staff on the ideal ways to connect and engage.

Personalized communication is different from creating a true dialogue with a member, and the latter should be the ultimate goal for your personalization efforts. After a member attends a virtual event, it's helpful to follow up with a personalized email with related content that may be helpful or to invite them to join an affinity group or online discussion with experts on the topic(s) discussed at the virtual event. This requires an organization to tag their content and be able to match member needs with opportunities quickly and efficiently. A solid integration between your AMS solution and marketing automation platform, and a regular review of member engagement data can help connect the dots for your team.

Thinking about where you might get information about your association from, are you using each of the following more, the same, or less compared to 2019, prior to the COVID-19 crisis?

Legend:
- Using more now
- Using as much now
- Using less now
- Don't use/Don't know

Channel	Using more now	Using as much now	Using less now	Don't use/Don't know
Personalized email	41%	37%	13%	9%
Facebook	39%	29%	10%	22%
Association Website	38%	41%	12%	9%
Email newsletters	37%	45%	13%	5%
Phone calls	36%	33%	18%	13%
Text messages	33%	32%	15%	21%
Instagram	30%	25%	11%	34%

THE GROWTH OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

A consistent trend that we saw across the board in Personify's research results from December 2020 is an increased interest in the ability to use an online community for creating connections and engaging with people who are having similar experiences.

Forty-four percent of member respondents told us that it's become more important to have an online member community in 2020 than in previous years. But surprisingly, less than 20 percent of association staff report using this channel while more than a third of member respondents told us that they would like to engage with their association using one.

Your online community is not only a place to connect; it's a goldmine for member data and interaction insights. If you've struggled to identify which of your virtual events and digital programs have created the most value for members, volunteers, or other stakeholders, leverage your online community and run reporting on views, comments, likes and attendance related to the programs and events in question.

And ask your members what's important to them. The associations who have launched private, branded online communities are able to build brand loyalty with their members by engaging in interactions and discussions that are authentic, focused and genuine. You're more likely to get an honest and thoughtful response from members in your online community than you may be in other channels like your social media networks. Make sure that you're making the most of this digital channel and using it to develop a long-term engagement approach this year and beyond.

TAKEAWAYS:

DIGITAL STRATEGY TIPS FOR ASSOCIATIONS & NONPROFITS

Leverage personalized communication to deliver tailored messages to your members and stakeholders. A solid integration between your AMS solution and marketing automation platform, and a regular review of member engagement data can help connect the dots for your team.

Evaluate your communication frequency across channels to see how often you are contacting members. And take the opportunity to survey your members to see how often they want to hear from you.

Revisit the strategy for your online community and, if you don't have one, consider how it can augment your engagement goals. Explore how your online community can help you identify trends, uncover insights and understand which programs and tactics are resonating with members.

Conduct an audit of your digital and social channels to understand the ROI of each channel and tactic, and any adjustments that are needed for your 2021 approach.

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