

USING TECHNOLOGY FOR MEMBER GROWTH AND ENGAGEMENT

Technology is not often quoted as a pathway to member retention, growth and engagement. The Institute of Public Works Engineering Australasia (IPWEA) is achieving important successes from integrating its technology and communications strategies.



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The new website adopted was the front end of a (Higher Logic) private networking community platform. This placed a strong focus on user generated content and community forums. The IPWEA's five online communities of practice launched a few months after the website and included our Ask Your Mates Open Forum. This has become a key driver to growth in our database. IPWEA has been able to position our forum as the premier place to discuss public works issues globally – ahead of any LinkedIn community or forum.

SYSTEMS FIRST APPROACH

The strategy commenced some time back with implementing a solid (IMIS) membership and contact database and integrating it with our financial systems and event registration processes. This provided the early foundations to launch a website fully integrated in the backend to our database.

Even though IPWEA membership stagnated at around 2,000 for a decade or more, through a series of technology and other measures, membership has now doubled to 4,000. The contact database including non-members has now grown to 25,000+ individuals and organisations – six times our membership. We now market our products and services to 25,000 contacts in our sector way beyond our initial membership "market".

Free web accounts. A decision was taken to subscribe our total database to our new communities of practice discussion forums (based on past interest areas) and to our Ask Your Mates Open Forum. Importantly we also allowed the creation of free IPWEA web accounts for non-members to access our communities of practice. These communities are strongly supported and Ask Your Mates has been a key initiative in engaging both members and non-members.

All IPWEA Divisions opted into the central membership database instead of the previous fragmented state-by-state approach. This was an essential element that also led to a single sign on policy for the integration of all third-party systems.

Website hits at the launch of the new website in 2011 were around 4,000 hits per month. The launch of our communities of practice and open forum in early 2012 saw this quickly grow to 7,000 hits per month.

INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS.

The next element was the refresh and re-launch of IPWEA's Public Works Professional magazine. IPWEA took a multi-channel approach to our communications and launched new e-newsletters. With declining advertising revenue, due to the trend to digital and the economic climate, IPWEA has now brought the magazine in-house and moved to a digital only format.

All magazine and e-newsletter articles are posted as blogs on the IPWEA website. These are tweeted to IPWEA's social media audience and posted on LinkedIn and Facebook using Zapier which connects applications and automates workflows. Linking these back to IPWEA's website for the full article increases web traffic.

The e-newsletters and magazine generate significant spikes in traffic to the IPWEA website. Visits to the website more than trebled to 12,000+ hits per month in two years and we are now achieving 26,000 hits per month in 2017.

SIMPLIFYING MEMBER JOIN.

A common membership fee structure was agreed across all divisions to allow a simplified online membership join process to be implemented. Instead of downloading one of the many membership forms from one of the division sites, then finding a fax machine to send it back, potential members can now quickly join online. They only need to provide the simplest of contact information and their credit card details and their application is accepted.

People often don't join because the process is too hard or they have never been asked to join. Implementing a simple online join process allowed us to then invite our non-member contacts to join the Institute with some immediate success.

Our integrated systems and communication strategies attracted the attention of our sister association in New Zealand. They did not have the capacity to implement their own systems and within 12 months they decided to merge to form a new division of IPWEA. This added around 800 members to the Institute.

International Online Learning. Time constraints in daily life is creating a shift to online learning. IPWEA has converted its key 3-day face-to-face workshops to a quality, interactive and engaging online format of 8 modules delivered over 10 weeks. This leads to the award of an IPWEA Professional Certificate in an area that is meeting the needs of an international audience. Registrations have more than doubled to 180 participants per course resulting in a strong return on investment. We are using LinkedIn, Twitter and collaborations with overseas associations to expand our international market.

IPWEA has a forward pipeline of new publications and industry practice notes. Our business model is to research and publish much needed professional resources for our members and the wider sector generally. These are marketed to our member and non-member database. The publications also form the basis for training workshops and can lead to subscription service offerings. Product and service subscriptions now form about 25% of total income diversifying revenue streams away from membership.

IPWEA's integrated systems, open communities of practice, online blogs, automated workflows, simplified member join process, and international eLearning program are having a dramatic impact on growth, branding, positioning and marketing. IPWEA has been ranked #1 for member engagement and membership value in benchmarking surveys greatly assisted by its integrated technologies and communications.

The article was provided by

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