



Coordinating ACA's membership campaign

The American Collectors Association represents collections agencies and individual collections professionals across the country. New technology, growth in personal debt and new fair debt collection legislation continue to change the industry. ACA has emerged as a valuable resource to collections professionals, providing training and information to members.

As the collections industry grows, new organizations emerge and new people begin working in collections, ACA's challenge has been to attract new members. Membership Director Judy Swanson said the organization's annual fall campaign to attract new members is one of its most critical activities.

"When you look at all the programs members become involved in, a new member is so valuable to ACA," Swanson said.

ACA's challenge

The campaign to send a comprehensive package of information about ACA to new collections professionals who have registered with their states' respective regulatory boards has been a time-consuming one for ACA staff who are recruited away from their areas of specialization for days, and in some cases weeks, for assembly work. And while the annual campaign's results have been favorable, too many prospective members were not being compelled to join.

ACA began to look for new ideas to, at the same time, streamline its recruiting process and improve the results of its campaigns. ACA began looking for a solution together with DPD, an integrated communications company that ACA had previously come to rely on as a long-time supplier for document and print communications. DPD had differentiated itself to ACA as a supplier that made its services more valuable by first understanding how projects fit into the big picture at ACA and then looking for alternatives to improve the projects' overall results.

DPD's solution

DPD designed a coordinated marketing program by which, through a series of brief contacts, ACA could more effectively communicate the benefits of membership. At the same time, DPD's program relieved the responsibility of ACA staff in the areas of assembling and distributing direct mail contacts. DPD managed the entire process and the role of ACA staff in the tactical elements of the campaign was transformed into one of program oversight.

The first step in the management of this program was to clean and update ACA's master list of prospective members. The list, which was a compilation of lists acquired from individual states' regulatory boards, included a large percentage of addresses that were either incomplete or not sufficient to meet postal regulations for direct mailings. DPD improved the deliverability of ACA's master list by checking and updating it with CASS and PAVE software certified by the US Postal Service.

DPD designed a new configuration for ACA's campaign to reach prospective members. Rather than sending prospective members a single, thick package filled with comprehensive information about the association, DPD's configuration divided the information over a series of three mailings. Operating on the premise that ACA's prospective members generally operate on tight schedules, the focus of each mailing was on clearly and concisely communicating a single benefit of membership. The contents of each mailing - an introductory letter, an article or brochure and a response card - easily fit within a regular #10 envelope.

DPD worked together with ACA staff to design the content of individual mailings. DPD provided sample copy for introductory letters, designed a brochure and re-purposed material which had already been created by ACA staff, such as an article pulled from ACA's monthly magazine, *Collector*.

A schedule was set to coordinate the information prospects received in the mail with personal contacts by telephone from member volunteers. DPD provided a mailing schedule, an assortment of sample mail packages and a suggested window for telephone contacts ACA's membership staff used to help communicate that schedule to these volunteers.

The timing for ACA's membership campaign was critical. In past years, ACA had begun the campaign in October but saw it continue over several weeks as the rigors of organizing and producing the materials and then physically assembling them into mail packages weighed on ACA staff. With four full-time staff members dedicating their time to the project, Swanson said it was a challenge to keep up with the regular workload.

"The year before, it took us a couple months to put the whole thing together," Swanson said. "We'd get behind and mail it in pieces."

It was ACA's goal to begin the campaign in October, but to complete it before the distractions of the holidays detracted from their impact. DPD maintained a tight schedule for ACA's campaigns, distributing three separate mailings to ACA prospects over the course of a preset six-week schedule. DPD produced or pulled needed envelopes, letterhead, brochures and articles from ACA's existing inventory, performed mail merges, assembled mailings and delivered them to the post office on schedule.

At the end of the formal campaign, DPD met with the key members of ACA's membership team to evaluate the results and discuss improvements in the process that could be implemented for the following year's campaign.

Despite the fact that the number of prospects ACA contacted in this campaign was significantly less than the numbers of prospects in previous years, the campaign generated more new members per prospect contacted. In addition, a comparative evaluation of staff hours, printing, mailing and campaign coordination expenses revealed that ACA spent less money per new member in the campaign coordinated by DPD than in campaigns conducted in previous years.

Benefits to ACA

- * DPD improved ACA's chances for attracting new members by improving the deliverability of ACA's master list, essentially adding to the number of prospects the association could reach with direct mailings.
- * DPD's membership program created more opportunities for ACA to appeal to prospective members by creating three different mailings, each focusing on a different membership benefit, and each giving the prospect an opportunity to initiate the application process.
- * ACA staff time spent writing and designing marketing materials for the new membership campaign was saved with DPD providing sample copy, designing brochures and re-purposing existing materials already created by ACA staff.
- * DPD enhanced the impact of personal telephone calls to prospects from member volunteers by providing information and maintaining a mailing schedule which allowed those volunteers to coordinate their calls with other information prospects were receiving about ACA.
- * ACA's membership campaign was completed on schedule, improving the results of the campaign by capitalizing on the frequency of three contacts by mail and a telephone contact over the course of six weeks.
- * ACA staff time spent in past years to assemble packages for mailing was saved with DPD coordinating this part of the process. Those staff members could instead devote their time to their core responsibilities.
- * The overall results of ACA's membership campaign were improved. More new members were generated per new prospect contacted. In addition, ACA spent less per new member than it had in previous years' campaigns.