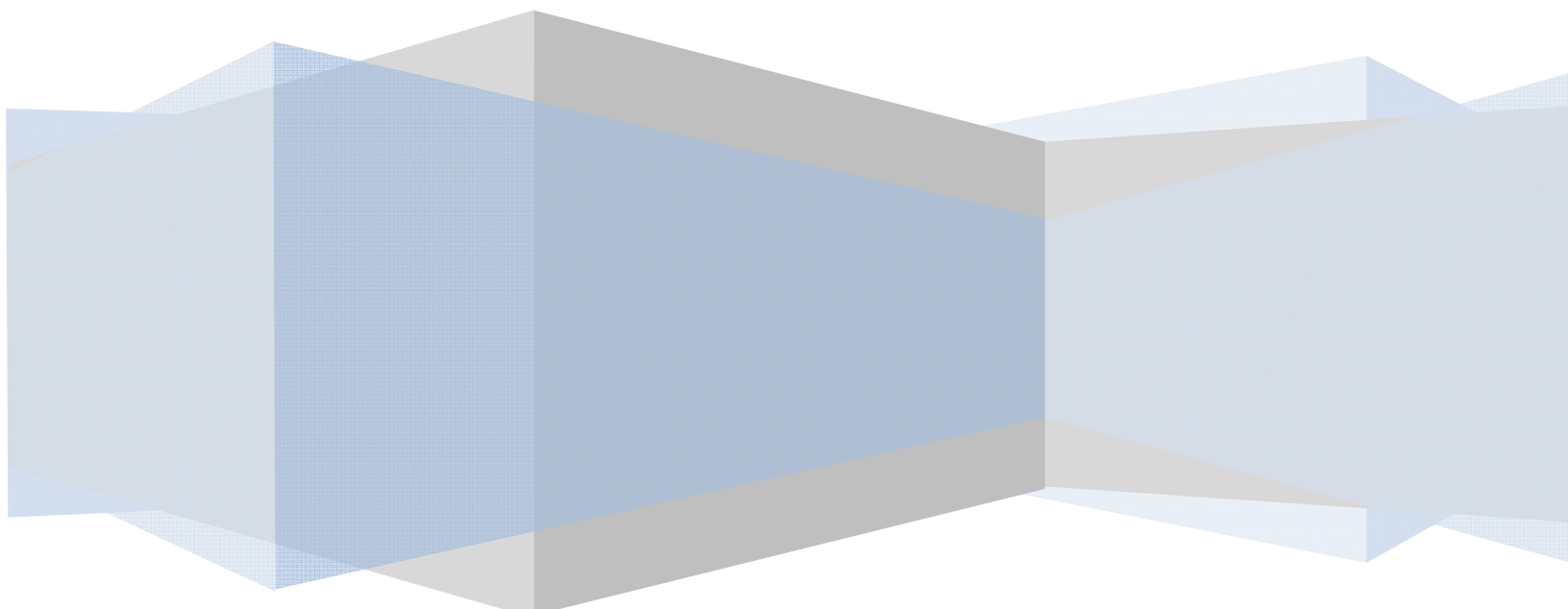




Certification Program Marketing

An Industry Scan

A large, abstract graphic composed of overlapping, semi-transparent blue and grey rectangular blocks, creating a 3D effect. The blocks are arranged in a way that suggests depth and movement, with some blocks appearing to be in front of others.

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Introduction

Certifying agencies of all sizes and scopes face difficult and unique marketing challenges each day whether they are trying to increase the number of exam applicants or launching a new product or service. Marketing is a subjective field. A successful strategy for one organization may yield no positive result for another. Success is reliant on a number of factors: the resources available, the commitment to implementing a plan, the audience, the message, the action desired, etc.

Certifying agencies are looking for creative and cost-effective ideas and valuable information to help them in communicating their message to target audiences. What type of information from other organizations and industry benchmarks are available to help us as we try to guide our volunteer leaders down the path toward strategic development and forward thinking in marketing and communication?

In 2009, SeaCrest distributed a survey titled, *Certification Program Marketing: An Industry Scan* to a diverse group of more than 700 certifying agencies. Additionally, announcements were sent to members of the American Board for Nursing Specialties (ABNS) and the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) through electronic newsletters. The goal of the survey was to gather data to help certifying organizations better understand the unique marketing challenges they face, evaluate their marketing efforts based on industry benchmarks, define communication tactics that work, and provide a tool for organizations to use during their planning activities with volunteer leaders. The results of the survey will help to develop an initial profile of how certifying agencies communicate and market to their stakeholders. A total of 124 representatives from certifying agencies completed the survey.

After compiling the survey results, SeaCrest conducted three focus groups with representatives from 10 certifying agencies who participated in the survey. The focus groups delved deeper into the effectiveness of various strategies and tactics our peers and colleagues use in marketing and communications.

Executive Summary

Certification Program Marketing: An Industry Scan was comprised of 42 questions on topics related to marketing and communications, including:

- Blogs
- Budget
- Volunteer support of marketing/communication projects
- Responsibility of implementing marketing/communication projects
- Marketing plan development
- Social networking tools (Facebook, Linked In, Twitter)
- Marketing challenges
- Marketing strategies and tactics

A summary of the survey key findings are outlined below.

Are certifying agencies developing and using a marketing plan?

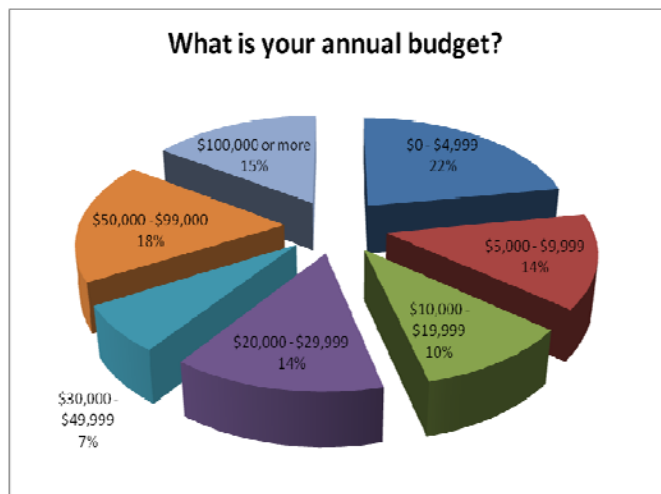
- More than 70% have a marketing plan
- Nearly 60% use it

Who is working on marketing/communication projects?

- 60% do not have a volunteer marketing committee
- 37% do not have a staff member(s) dedicated to marketing
- 30% have more than one, full-time staff member dedicated to marketing

What do certifying agencies spend on marketing?

- 22% have an annual budget between \$0 and \$4,999
- Nearly 18% have an annual budget between \$50K - \$99,999
- 42% said budget has decreased because of economy
- 43% said there has been no change in budget due to economy



Are certifying agencies taking advantage of social networking tools?

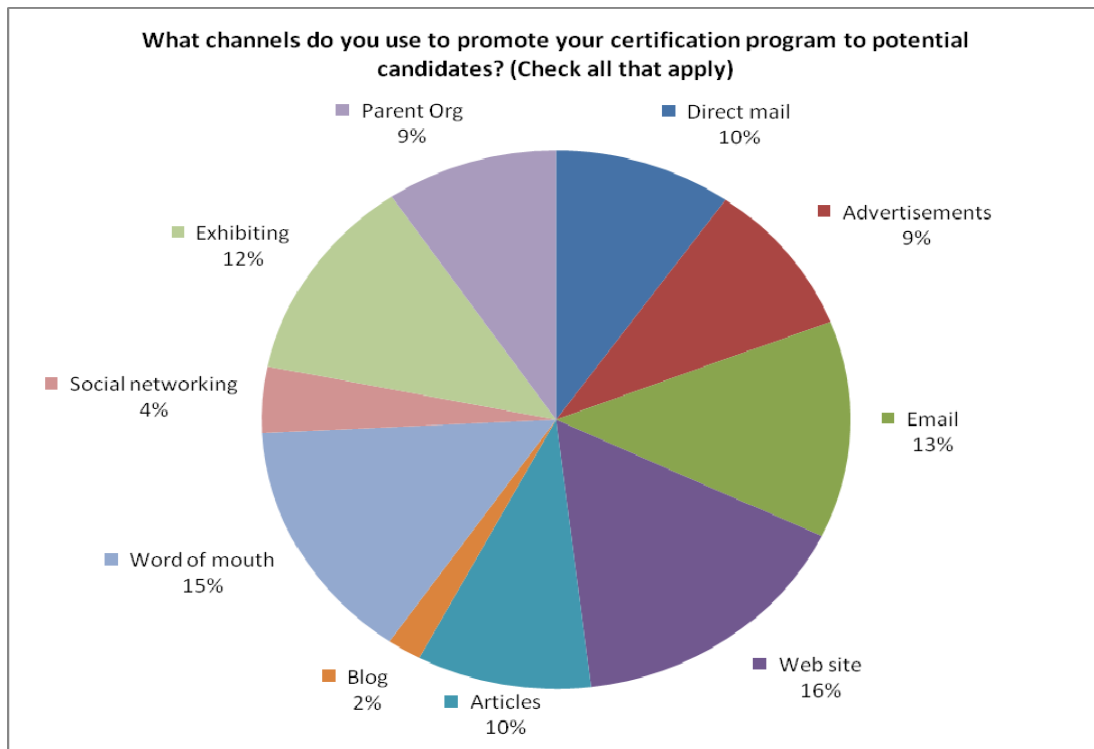
- 83% don't currently have a blog
- 60% don't use a social networking tool (Facebook, Linked In, Twitter, etc)
- 40% do use a social networking tool

What marketing goals do certifying agencies have, and what challenges do they face trying to achieve those goals?

- Top goals:
 - > Increase the number of certificants
 - > Raise awareness of the certification
 - > Increase retention rates
- Top challenges:
 - > Not having enough money for marketing
 - > Not having enough staff time dedicated to marketing
- 65% of organizations reported that they don't allocate enough resources to marketing

What channels do certifying agencies use?

- Web site (92%) — Web site is primary tool to communicate with potential certificants
- Word of Mouth (84%)
- Email (75%) — Email (on a quarterly basis) is the most common way to communicate with current certificants
- Exhibiting at conferences/trade shows (71%)



What tactics get the best results?

1. Word of Mouth
2. Web site
3. Email

Focus Group Summary

After completing the survey, approximately 10 representatives from certifying agencies participated in focus groups, conducted by teleconference. The goal of the focus groups was to discuss the key findings of the survey, share strategies and tactics, and gather anecdotal data regarding the topics covered in the survey. The focus group participants represented a variety of industries (including nursing, interior design, data management, human resources, etc.) as well as volume of candidates/certificants.

Based on the information gathered during the focus group phase of the project, SeaCrest has identified the following trends in marketing and communications for certifying agencies.

- Certifying agencies rely heavily on their Web site to market and communicate with both current and potential certificants as well as other key stakeholders such as employers and academia. Organizations are, or should be, focused on strategies to increase the value of Web site as a marketing tool. Organizations that host Web sites that are effective as marketing tools evaluate the site, analyze web metrics, and know how to use metrics to increase traffic.
- Certifying agencies already use social networking tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter or are planning on doing so in the near future. However, many organizations have not determined how successful these efforts have been yet. For organizations investigating social networking tools, one of the first challenges is defining the goals associated with using this strategy and how to evaluate if it is successful or not.
- Certifying agencies, like most organizations, are interested in implementing marketing strategies that focus on “getting the best bang for your buck.”

Survey Results

Does your organization have a volunteer marketing committee?

Yes	40.3%
No	59.7%

What is the marketing committee's primary responsibility? (Check all that apply)

To develop a strategic marketing plan with a consultant and/or staff	35.0%
To develop a strategic marketing plan on their own	6.8%
To recommend marketing strategies to the Board of Directors	32.0%
To implement an existing marketing plan on their own	8.7%
To help staff implement a marketing plan	21.4%
To oversee staff marketing functions	13.6%
To serve as spokespeople for the organization	6.8%
N/A – we don't have a marketing committee	48.5%

"Other" responses indicated that there is little interaction with the committee resulting in the staff being responsible for marketing initiatives. Other responses mentioned that the marketing team is entirely staff and consultant as needed.

Is your marketing committee doing a good job?

Yes	11.8%
Somewhat	26.4%
No	8.2%
N/A – we don't have a marketing committee	53.6%

Who is primarily in charge of implementing marketing projects in your certification organization?

Board of Directors or governing body	14.8%
Volunteer committee	0.9%
Staff member	77.4%
Outside consultant, company or firm	5.2%
No one	1.7%

"Other" responses included: Director of Marketing, Staff member with the support of a consultant, and Director of Communications

Do you have a staff member dedicated to marketing and communications?

Yes, more than 1 full-time staff members work primarily in marketing	30.3%
Yes, 1 full-time staff member works primarily in marketing	16.8%
Yes, a part-time staff member works primarily in marketing	16.0%
No	37.0%

“Other” responses indicated that the certification department markets directly to certificants, a full time staff member works part time on marketing, or they contract with a consultant

What is your annual budget to implement marketing projects? (Please note: this figure should not include staff salaries.)

\$0 - \$4,999	22.2%
\$5,000 - \$9,999	13.7%
\$10,000 - \$19,999	10.3%
\$20,000 - \$29,999	13.7%
\$30,000 - \$49,000	6.8%
\$50,000 - \$99,999	17.9%
\$100,000 or more	15.4%

Do you have a hard copy (printed) newsletter or magazine?

Yes	48.8%
No	51.2%
I Don't Know	0.0%

How often is it mailed?

Weekly	0.0%
Monthly	15.8%
Quarterly	13.9%
Bi-annually	15.8%
Annually	5.9%
N/A – we don't have a hard copy newsletter or magazine	48.5%

“Other” responses included: Three times per year, bi-monthly, six issues a year, and every other month

Do you have an electronic newsletter?

Yes	86.2%
No	13.8%
I Don't Know	0.0%

How often is it distributed?

Daily	0.0%
Weekly	8.0%
Monthly	25.0%
Quarterly	39.3%
Bi-Annually	9.8%
Annually	6.3%
N/A – we don't have an electronic newsletter	11.6%

“Other” responses included: Three times per year, bi-weekly, and bi-monthly

Do you have a blog?

Yes	17.5%
No	82.5%
I Don't Know	0.0%

How often do you post entries on the blog?

At least once daily	3.7%
At least once Weekly	7.5%
At least once Monthly	7.5%
N/A We don't have a blog	81.3%

Who writes the blog entries?

Staff member	15.1%
Volunteer	11.3%
Guest author(s)	7.5%
N/A - We don't have a blog	80.2%

“Other” responses included: Certified nurses

Do you find your blog valuable as a marketing tool?

Yes	11.2%
No	6.5%
N/A – we don't have a blog	82.2%
Why or why not?	

Participants who answered “why not?” indicated that it requires people to log in when they don't have the time, and that the blog's too new, but it is predicted to eventually be valuable

Do you use an online social networking tool?

Yes, Facebook	16.9%
Yes, LinkedIn	14.4%
Yes, My Space	0.8%
Yes, other (please indicate)	6.8%
No	60.2%
I don't know	0.8%

“Other” responses included: Their own branded tool, Higher logic, Yahoo, Twitter, and e-mail list server communities

Do your stakeholders participate in the social networking tool?

Yes	18.3%
Somewhat	27.0%
No	8.7%
N/A, we don't use LinkedIn, My Space, or Facebook	46.1%

“Other” responses indicated that stakeholders participate voluntarily or that it's too soon to determine

Do you have a marketing plan with defined goals and strategies?

Yes	71.5%
No	26.0%
I Don't Know	2.4%

Do you use it?

Yes	58.8%
No	0.0%
Sometimes	16.0%
N/A – we don't have a marketing plan with defined goals and strategies	25.2%

Is your logo is an accurate visual representation of your organization?

Yes	82.8%
No	10.7%
I Don't Know	6.6%

What marketing challenges does your certification program currently face? (Please rate the answers below on a scale from 1 to 5. 1 = not a challenge, 5 = top challenge)

	1	2	3	4	5
Not enough money to spend on marketing	9	15	20	30	24
Little or no staff expertise in marketing	21	22	32	16	8
Competition from another credentialing body	53	18	12	7	8
Not enough staff time to spend on implementing a marketing plan	10	19	27	31	11
No organized marketing plan to follow	32	21	24	13	7
Not knowing where to spend marketing budget (to get the best bang for the buck)	16	24	23	16	15

“Other” responses indicated that there is difficulty in getting the message across and obtaining market research. Other challenges included have a limited audience, the competition from non, third party accredited certification, and the economy

What are your general marketing goals? (check all that apply)

Increase the number of certificants	89.2%
Increase certificant retention rates	74.5%
Raise awareness of the certification	89.2%
Educate employers on the value of certification in your field	82.4%
Educate the general public on the value of your certification program	56.9%
Increase the number of sponsors	18.6%
Promote the sales of publications or other products	20.6%
Increase registrations for conferences, seminars, training or other events	23.5%

“Other” responses included: Raising state and federal regulators awareness of the value of the profession and the credential

What channels do you use to promote your certification program to potential candidates? (Check all that apply)

Direct mail	56.4%
Advertisements	53.5%
Email	75.2%
Web site	92.1%
Article placement in industry or consumer publications	55.4%
Blog	10.9%
Word of mouth	84.2%
Social networking sites such as Facebook, Linked In, etc.	22.8%
Exhibiting	71.3%
Parent organization/association	54.5%

“Other” responses included: Professional Development Council, membership organizations, liaisons at universities with professional programs, conferences/partnerships with other associations, training institutions, educators in the graduate programs, and webinars

For each of the communication channels you use, please rank their importance on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being not important and 5 being very important)

	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Direct mail	7	10	13	26	18	23
Advertisements	10	10	25	19	9	18
Email	3	1	8	20	52	13
Web site	2	0	5	17	67	6
Article placement in industry or consumer publications	1	7	17	21	25	19
Blog	12	9	5	2	3	51
Word of mouth	2	1	9	12	60	11
Social networking sites such as Facebook, Linked In, etc.	12	11	13	8	2	39
Exhibiting	5	13	24	23	18	11
Parent organization/association	5	3	8	12	38	25

“Other” responses included: Related organizations/associations such as state affiliates

What is your primary method of communication with your CURRENT certificants?

Direct mail (letters/postcards/etc)	24.5%
Email	57.8%
Web site	14.7%
Blog	0.0%
Word of mouth	0.0%
Social networking sites such as Facebook, Linked In, etc.	0.0%
Exhibiting	2.9%

“Other” responses included: Emails blasts, and newsletters

How often do you communicate with current certificants?

Daily	2.2%
Weekly	5.5%
Monthly	30.8%
Quarterly	39.6%
Semi-Annually	13.2%
Annually	8.8%

“Other” responses included: Website, five-year certifications cycle, as needed, never, during exhibitions, every three years when due to recertify, bi-monthly, and 2-3 times per year.

What is your primary method of communication with POTENTIAL candidates?

Direct mail	10.3%
Advertisements	5.2%
Email	23.7%
Web site	34.0%
Article placement in industry or consumer publications	1.0%
Blog	0.0%
Word of mouth	10.3%
Social networking sites such as Facebook, Linked In, etc.	0.0%
Exhibiting	7.2%
Parent organization/association	8.2%

“Other” responses included: University faculty, schools for preparations, telephone, education programs, and training programs

How often do you communicate with potential candidates?

Daily	15.9%
Weekly	7.3%
Monthly	30.5%
Quarterly	26.8%
Semi-Annually	12.2%
Annually	7.3%

“Other” responses indicated that respondents don’t communicate until the potential candidate actually becomes an exam candidate or until the potential candidate contacts them. Many also stated they only communicate as needed or during exhibiting

What tactics do you find work best with your target audiences to achieve your marketing goals? (Check all that apply)

Direct Mail (mailing letters, postcards, brochures)	40.9%
Discounts	23.7%
Email	61.3%
Exhibits	29.0%
Ads	17.2%
Testimonials/Case Studies	28.0%
Word of mouth	67.7%
Web site	62.4%

“Other” responses included: State licensure requirements

Do consider your web site an important part of your marketing efforts?

Yes	99.0%
No	1.0%
I Don't Know	0.0%

How often do you update the content of your web site?

Daily	12.0%
Weekly	24.0%
Monthly	13.0%
On an as-needed basis	51.0%

How often do you update the visual design and/or organization of your web site?

At least annually	16.7%
Every 2-3 years	53.1%
Every 4-5 years	14.6%
It has been more than 5 years since we re-organized or re-designed the look and /or structure of our web site	15.6%

“Other” responses indicated that many are currently in the process now

Is your certification program accredited by an accrediting body (such as NCCA, ANSI, or ABNS)?

Yes	52.0%
No	32.0%
No, but we are in the process of applying	16.0%

Do you use your accreditation as a marketing tool?

Yes	51.0%
No	9.2%
N/A – we are not accredited	39.8%

Do you plan to pursue accreditation to distinguish your organization?

Yes	31.9%
No	22.3%
N/A – we are already accredited	45.7%

How has the number of certificants changed in the past 10 years for your organization?

Increased slightly	33.7%
Increased significantly	51.5%
Decreased slightly	5.9%
Decreased significantly	4.0%
Stayed about the same	5.0%
Do not know	0.0%

Can you link the change in the number of certificants to your organization's marketing efforts?

Yes	38.6%
No	35.6%
I don't know	25.7%

How has the current economic recession impacted your marketing budget?

The budget has been increased	5.0%
The budget has been decreased	42.6%
No impact	43.6%
I do not know	8.9%

Do you plan on increasing your marketing budget in the next year?

Yes	29.6%
No	70.4%

By how much do you plan on increasing your marketing budget next year?

\$0 - \$4,999	11.8%
\$5,000 - \$9,999	8.6%
\$10,000 - \$19,999	5.4%
\$20,000 - \$29,999	4.3%
\$30,000 - \$49,000	1.1%
\$50,000 - \$99,999	2.2%
\$100,000 or more	2.2%
N/A – we do not plan on increasing our marketing budget in the next year.	64.5%

In your opinion, does your organization spend enough resources (staff, budget, etc) on marketing?

Yes	35.4%
No	64.6%

"Other" responses indicated that money is always an issue or that the current staff is too busy to properly focus efforts

Do you feel your organization is missing marketing opportunities?

Yes	79.8%
No	20.2%

“Other” responses indicated that not focusing on the right areas and insufficient resources make it hard to do it all. Other areas of difficulty included email, follow-up, and not being up to date with current social networking trends

Conclusion

The goal of *Certification Program Marketing: An Industry Scan* was to gather information about how certifying agencies approach the often subjective field of marketing and communications that can be used by other organizations to evaluate their current marketing efforts and shape future strategies.

We encourage you to use this data presented in this report to start a strategic conversation on how you market and promote your program. In the course of this conversation, your organization's leadership may want to consider the following questions.

- What are goals of social networking? If you have a blog, what are you trying to achieve? (i.e. recruit candidates, create a community of certifiants, communicate more with current certifiants?)
- How are you going to evaluate if the use of blogs, Facebook, or Linked In is successful? What are the success markers for these tactics?
- Is your marketing plan helpful or does it leave staff and volunteers confused?
- Are you focusing on too many goals, stretching resources too thin?
- Are you doing the same things each year simply because you did them the year before?
- Are you taking risks? What is your risk tolerance?
- What is the most effective way to have your volunteers involved in the process?