

# Adapt and Change—Strategies and Tactics for Attracting New Members to Your Chapter

BY KATY KUCZEK

**In the state of Missouri, there are approximately 600,000 people living with hearing loss**, according to the Missouri Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Kathy Patrick, chairperson of the HLAA Greater St. Louis Chapter, is painfully aware of the discrepancy between this statistic and the 25 dues-paying members registered in her database. Attracting new members—and retaining them as future advocates and dedicated volunteers—is a daunting task. Passionate leadership can only go so far.

Kathy embodies the same tireless energy and commitment to inclusion of people with hearing loss that most chapter leaders effuse. It's commendable but cannot likely be sustained long-term. Joan Kleinrock, professional chapter development advisor for HLAA, worries about their eventual burnout. Her advice is to start recruiting “the next generation of leaders.”

Among the obstacles to expanding chapter membership are a limited budget, lack of marketing expertise, and the absence of the tech savviness that your average millennial takes for granted. A younger generation that grew up with the ubiquitous internet cloud and Wi-Fi at their disposal has a better understanding of the power of the internet and social media, knows how to harness this technology and use it to influence.

Erin Mirante, HLAA national chapter coordinator, told me, “Chapters offer so many services that we can't from the HLAA national office. It is becoming

increasingly important—especially as technology continues to develop—that chapters are able to communicate their benefits of membership in a way that will draw new members in and keep them interested.”

Kathy lamented that she is “at a loss for getting the word out,” but admitted that nothing new had been posted to their chapter website and the chapter Facebook page is not active. She's only one person and realizes she needs help.

For many chapters, the frustration with effective outreach is a familiar story. HLAA recognizes this struggle and has been busy making great strides to lay the groundwork for future marketing initiatives.

## Communication is Key

Erin asked me to write about my experience working with my local chapter, the HLAA Rochester Chapter. In my parental role, I am a mother to a college-age daughter who was born with asymmetrical sensorineural hearing loss. In my professional role as a graphic

designer, I was hired (along with my strategic writing/public relations partner) to create a communications plan for the chapter.

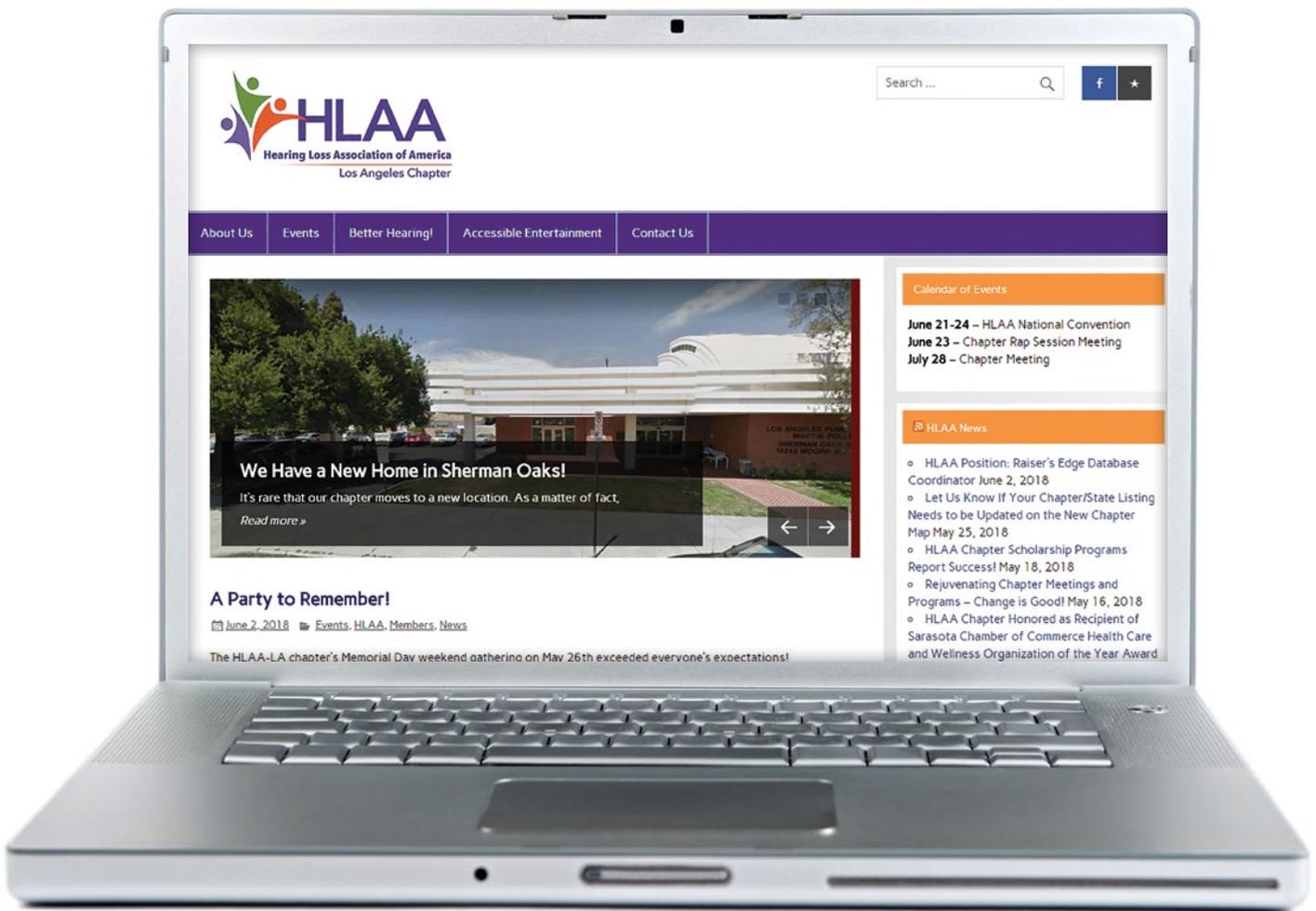
We met with a core group of chapter board and marketing committee members in an informal focus group setting, prepared with a list of targeted questions and a whiteboard to record the range of answers. The chapter's current situation was detailed (number of members, related facts and statistics, outreach efforts, etc.), along with its audiences, key messages, obstacles and objectives.

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We organized and distilled this input to develop a multi-page plan to serve as a guide the chapter could refer to when considering future marketing endeavors.

It's obvious that the primary audience for your chapter is anyone with hearing loss; a secondary audience is the friends and families of those people with hearing loss; and a tertiary audience would include audiologists or anyone else working with people who have hearing loss. It's

important to identify your various audiences, as different strategies and tactics are associated with each.



Visit the award-winning HLAA Los Angeles Chapter website at [hlaa-la.org](http://hlaa-la.org).

Key messages are critical to any marketing outreach as you want to be consistent in what you're communicating to your audiences. For Rochester, the central message



Tim Browning, HLAA Los Angeles Chapter secretary, webmaster and recipient of the 2018 Best Chapter Website award at the HLAA2018 Convention.

was, "You are not alone in your hearing loss." The chapter serves a dual purpose of bringing together people with hearing loss in a social setting "where it's okay not to hear well," as chapter president Margaret Cochran likes to say, and taking an active role in advocating for greater access in public venues.

Objectives or goals may seem self-evident—to attract new members and increase your volunteer base. For the Rochester chapter, other objectives included driving overall awareness of the chapter and all its offerings, increasing awareness of loops and open captioning in the community, promoting their new demo center for assistive listening devices (ALDs), and recruiting the next generation of volunteers.

## Taking Action

The majority of the work that goes into a cohesive communications plan lies in the creative development of strategies and tactics. It's important to differentiate a strategy from a tactic. A strategy defines what you want to do—like improve your chapter website, use social media to connect with members, or promote the existence of ALDs at local venues. Tactics are the more tangible steps you're going to take to achieve your goals.

The number one strategy we proposed was to improve the chapter website as a communications tool. The tactics that we outlined to support this strategy included: organize and minimize the high volume of material currently on the site for easier navigation, create a set of visual banners on the homepage depicting the diversity of people with hearing loss and highlighting important local and national events, rebuild the site in WordPress to respond to mobile devices and to allow for easier updates in the future, establish a "Find an Audiologist" feature on the homepage, provide an interactive calendar of events, a newsletter signup button, and links to social media.

Other proposed strategies and tactics included utilizing social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube,

etc.) to connect the local hearing loss community, leveraging the talent of a teen group to increase younger membership (using Instagram and YouTube to post relevant content and videos), leveraging the audiologist community to spread awareness (through brochures, links to website and feature stories in the newsletter) and capitalizing on the new demo center through public relations/media opportunities and advertising (print and digital).

Some of the tactics had costs associated with them that were cost-prohibitive for the chapter, but others only required a time investment.

## The Value of a Chapter Website

Few chapter members understand the value of a well-conceived and constructed website better than HLAA Los Angeles Chapter webmaster Tim Browning. You may recognize Tim's name as he was honored at HLAA2018 Convention recently for best chapter website!

When Tim joined the chapter in 2013, a screenshot of their newsletter served as the website. He quickly saw an opportunity to use his technology background to modernize their web presence. The process took close to two years but proved well worth the time and effort of everyone involved.

Tim's goal was to present the chapter as multigenerational, to reach both the current audience and attract a younger one. Tim said, "The biggest challenge in creating an effective website is managing the content." Once a website has been launched, it's important to keep the site relevant with new content on a continual basis.

Tim takes that thought one step further by predicting that in the future support may have a multimedia focus. He thinks there will always be a place for meetings, but a new generation may be more comfortable chatting online or through video interaction. His mantra moving forward is "adapt and change." **HL**



Katy Kuczek is a freelance writer and art director (owner, Aurora Design) with a national and international client base. Originally from the Hudson Valley, New York area, she's been self-employed and raising her two children in upstate New

York for the past two decades. Her daughter was born with sensorineural hearing loss, which led her to seek more information from HLAA. She is a current member, and former board member, of the HLAA Rochester Chapter. You can visit her website at [katykuczek.com](http://katykuczek.com).