
How to Market on a Shoestring Budget



A tight budget won't knock your association out of the publicity game. Learn how to pick media channels that provide the most bang for your limited buck.

The big event is just a few short months away. Your organization and members are eager to begin promoting it and receiving substantial publicity. From advertisements to social media to news coverage, there is no shortage of communication channels out there to tell your story. What you're lacking, however, are resources—namely, you're on a limited budget.

A tight spending amount does not have to be a barrier to a successful campaign. When you plan right and stay focused, you can set your association up for success on a shoestring or sky's-the-limit budget.

Set the budget early. It may be difficult, but you have to crunch the numbers and set your budget upfront. Do you have a few hundred dollars or hundreds of thousands? Knowing your realistic budget from the get-go keeps expectations in check and allows you to focus on activities you can afford.

Envision the finish line at the start. After you know what you can spend, ask yourself, what is our goal? What will success look like when you cross the finish line? Make it specific and achievable so you stay disciplined on what your organization needs to accomplish with the budget you have. Is it driving attendance at the conference? Are you looking to increase membership and engagement?

Thinking about the end goal at the start will help your team create a plan that's built for producing a positive outcome.



Identify—and remember—your target audience. You know your budget and you know your goal. Now, who do you need to reach? Your audience drives everything, from how you frame your message to the tactics you use. Identify your key audiences at the start and then focus on budget-friendly tactics to reach them.

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Say you are planning to promote a conference around K-12 education reform. If you had unlimited resources, you could market it to the world. However, with a tight budget, think about who is likely to attend: your members, the broader education community, or maybe even policymakers and their staffs. You can make a little go a longer way when you focus on who matters most.

Develop your game plan. Now you have a budget, goal, and target audience. It's time to pick the communications channels that will reach your audience based on the dollars available.

Let's start on the shoestring end of the budget. Leverage the communications channels you already have to reach members: newsletters, blog posts on your website, meetings, webinars, conference calls, and so forth. For publicity beyond your membership, press releases (if you have something newsworthy to say) and briefings with reporters can help you gain earned media in newspapers, magazines, and online news sites). It's hard work to get a positive article in a news publication, so you might need to commission a report or conduct a survey to get your news hook.

Social media offers affordable options for quickly and steadily reaching your organization's existing followers and other key audiences on their phones, tablets, and computers. Many social sites can be used without cost. Social media also offers plenty of paid choices (e.g., ads on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram), which can be targeted based on user interests, demographics, and more.

When evaluating social media channels, think about how they will contribute to your larger marketing strategy and the people you need to reach. For example, some channels are more suitable for connecting with younger audiences, such as Instagram and Snapchat, while some platforms might skew slightly older and reach your members, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Or if you want to produce and promote a compelling video, Twitter and YouTube might fit the bill.

Other paid media options include digital advertisements on news websites, print advertisements, sponsoring a news organization's newsletter to a target audience, and podcasts, which are increasing in popularity by the day—**especially among millennials.**

Making the most out of a limited campaign budget is not easy. Fortunately, if you do the hard work upfront, you can make an impactful splash in the end.

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