

Going Green and Saving Green (\$)

A Story from Vermont

THREE YEARS AGO, the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VAEYC) decided to go green, with two goals in mind that its Governing Board saw as beneficial to members: to be kind to the environment and to save money. With these dual goals, the board embraced new technology to reduce the association's use of paper and lower its operating costs.

What happened went beyond everyone's expectations. Using online technology as the primary communication tool ultimately let our Affiliate take advantage of new online social networking tools, engage members in beneficial ways, and reach out to our younger members.

The first initiative—Conference registration. The first step of a three-year plan entailed offering VAEYC's annual conference registration and program brochures in an online format, in addition to print, with the goal of making registration entirely paperless by year three. In a three-year phase-in period, we saw an increasing number of conference attendees using the online process.

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In year one (2007), 50 percent of the conference attendees registered online. We were especially interested to find that of the 50 percent who registered online, three-fourths needed no follow-up service. In contrast, of the 50 percent registering by mail, *all* required additional follow-up service. The message to us was that online registration provided a better, more efficient process for our members.

In year two (2008), we saw more positive change: 80 percent of the conference goers registered online and only 20 percent mailed in their registrations.

In year three (2009) of the phase-in, with some nervousness on all of our parts, the VAEYC conference went paperless. Educators on our mailing list received only a printed postcard notifying them that registration was open—on the VAEYC Web site (www.vaeyc.org). We made the program brochure available as an online PDF. Our conference consultant worked with a graphic designer to give the online conference brochure a first-class professional look.

Not only did the online format let us go for full color (a cost-prohibitive process in print), but also it permitted us to expand the program content and number of pages, which meant more paid advertising and an increase in income to support the conference. Offering the conference brochure digitally saved VAEYC about \$4,000 in

printing and mailing costs and had the added benefit of respecting the environment by reducing our paper usage.

In the third year, conference attendance held up, with only a slight dip in numbers due to economic pressures. But the big news was that 95 percent of all conference participants registered online.

After the conference, we received positive feedback from members in an online survey. We asked attendees about their conference experience. All respondents gave favorable feedback regarding their registration experiences and receiving the conference program brochure online. VAEYC did offer to print and mail program brochures to educators without online access; no one chose this option.

Because of the success of the online access to the conference program and registration, VAEYC plans to continue this method for the 2010 conference. One change we are considering, how-

NAEYC Affiliate Successes, published in the January, May, and September issues of *Young Children*, shares inspiring projects and strategies that other NAEYC Affiliates might learn from and replicate. If your Affiliate has a project or strategy to share, contact Susan Friedman at sfriedman@naeyc.org. This column also appears in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

ever, is a second conference reminder postcard by mail and more and earlier marketing of the conference in our e-mail newsletter and on the association's Web site.

VAEYC also made it possible for conference attendees to access online the conference forms for documenting professional development. This streamlined the process and eliminated the need for educators to receive a paper copy for each conference workshop attended. Conference attendees surveyed responded favorably, and VAEYC saved the cost of copying and mailing the forms. With the money saved, we hired a technology-savvy college student to create an electronic program database to manage professional development documentation.

The board embraced new technology to reduce the association's use of paper and lower its operating costs.

The second initiative—Online newsletter. We took a big step in transforming the twice-a-year, snail-mailed newsletter into an online version sent to members six times a year. Our conference coordinator consultant customized an HTML e-newsletter template, with VAEYC's branding, to send out to members and others. Again, saving paper was important, and the benefit to VAEYC members increased threefold as a result of reliable and consistent distribution.

In the past, each issue cost more than \$1,000 to print and mail. Now, the online newsletter's delivery price is about \$10 per issue. Yes, \$10 total! Our *eConnections* is now available free to anyone who requests it, in addition to members. We are excited about the improved quality of *eConnections* and

its message supporting young children and their families and how perfectly it aligns with VAEYC's mission to improve the education and care of young children and their families in Vermont.

Along with *eConnections*, we added other electronic resources for members to use in communicating with each other and their association. They include Facebook and a blog written regularly by our executive director. When *eConnections* is distributed, the click-through rate on VAEYC's Web site is consistently extremely high. Members find this instant communication exciting; for example, we posted photos of the conference on Facebook immediately after the event. This growing excitement, we believe, will encourage more members to attend the conference each year.

Our third initiative—Conference calling. During high gas prices last year, the VAEYC Governing Board decided to use conference calling for board communication. It was a cost-saving measure but also a change that everyone felt was good for the environment. Now, the VAEYC executive committee meets monthly via conference call instead of driving across the state of Vermont. Since this change, the attendance at executive committee meetings is remarkable, with rarely a committee member absent.

Conference calling has made an impact on the quarterly full board meetings. It enables one governing board member who typically is unable to attend the January meeting to join colleagues in Vermont via a conference call. Overall, board meeting attendance is up; with our culture

Tips on Initiating Change

1. Overcome fears of technology! It's a helpful tool.
2. Get help from a technology-savvy support person (board member, Affiliate member, college student, or consultant).
3. Take your time; make program changes in phases.
4. Check in with members to get their feedback.
5. Welcome the opportunity to be kind to the environment, to save money, and to engage members in new ways.

changed, if board members call in, they are considered "present."

As board president, I worked together with the Governing Board, VAEYC's executive director Melissa Riegel-Garrett, and our conference coordinator/consultant James Woodard to steer the changes described in this three-year period, 2007 to 2010. The lesson we learned in Vermont is that going green is not only good for the environment but also good for our budget and for members!

For more information about this project, e-mail Laurel Bongiorno at lbongiorno@vaeyc.org or James Woodard at info@jameswoodardconsulting.com.

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Tools VAEYC Used to . . .

- create a customized HTML newsletter—www.campaignmonitor.com
- hold board meetings via conference calls—www.freeconferencecall.com
- survey members via e-mail—www.surveymonkey.com