



AARP's Donnellan ushers in a new era of comms

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The AARP's CCO is working to increase the organization's visibility and communications integration amid a variety of opportunities to influence discussion.

When news reports in August began to focus on rumors that a government-sponsored healthcare plan would include "death panels" to decide which patients were worthy of care, it was an issue that resonated with older Americans.

AARP has since held nearly 300 virtual and traditional town halls, including one hosted by President Barack Obama in its on-site studio in Washington, to debunk what AARP says were myths and lies about reform. Nearly 1.4 million members called into the virtual town halls, 100,000-plus attended live events.

"We spent a lot of time educating our members and providing them with information," says Kevin Donnellan, EVP and chief communications officer for AARP. "We saw it in calls from our members."

Addressing the "death panels" issue shows how efficiently an organization like AARP, which represents 40 million-plus Americans 50 years old and older, can influence a policy debate, activate an increasingly powerful Baby Boomer generation, and affect the behaviors and decisions of its members.

Much of AARP's power lays in the sophisticated, integrated way it communicates and through the many channels it has in place.

"Communications is fundamental to what we do," says Barry Rand, CEO of AARP, via e-mail. "When you have 40 million members, it becomes that much more important."

Donnellan, a nearly 25-year AARP veteran, has been behind most of the major communications changes and efforts at the organization. Under his guidance as EVP and CCO, a position he was appointed to in 2005, the communications department underwent a massive restructuring, which had begun during his previous tenure as MD of the integrated communications group.

Donnellan also renewed the team's focus on social change and implemented one of the savviest digital strategies in Washington.

"Our goal," he says, "was to really get us to speak with one voice - to use clear, concise, consumer-friendly, and, hopefully, motivational messages with our members."

Bill Novelli, former CEO of AARP and a founder of Porter Novelli, notes that one of the reasons he named Donnellan CCO was his understanding of the organization.

Prior to his role with the integrated communications group, Donnellan worked for AARP's lobbying and voting, advocacy, and legislation and public policy units.

"He epitomizes what a chief communications officer ought to be," says Novelli.

"Communications today is critical. It's impossible not to have the communications person at the highest decision-making level."

The group's external and internal communications needed work, he explains. So Donnellan pulled together the teams for broadcast, Web, media relations, publications, internal communications, strategic communications and public outreach, and editorial content. Previously, many of the teams operated independently, without a unified message.

"He essentially became the architect of all that change," Novelli says.

"He's innovative," adds Eileen Marcus, SVP and senior partner at Fleishman-Hillard, which has worked with AARP for five years. "He has the vision to say, 'What now?'"

There are currently 225 staffers on AARP's communications team, which includes daily bloggers, a Web team, media relations pros, and content providers for two magazines, Web sites, a newspaper, two TV shows, five radio shows, and a books division.

"The whole point was to pull all our communication properties together and leverage them in a way we had not before," explains Donnellan. "I [wanted] to build state-of-the-art properties to communicate with members and the public in ways they wanted."

The restructuring coincided with social media's growth. As Donnellan worked to integrate communications, he added a Web team and developed an online strategy.

As part of reevaluating its digital strategy, AARP plans to roll out additional features and changes through 2010 to drive user experience and engagement, he notes.

The organization is looking at tools like Google Wave and Sidewiki as more people over the age of 50 turn to the Web for information, news, and entertainment. To be as effective as possible, AARP has learned to tap into its communications channels to distribute messages for the greatest reach and impact.

When AARP The Magazine published a story about the caregiving challenges facing injured veterans returning from Iraq, the organization, realizing the legs of the story, created a documentary about the issue.

The story then ran on AARP's English and Spanish TV shows, a radio show, as an interactive Web piece on AARP.org, and as a Q&A with members of Congress on a public affairs program.

"It's not just being in the media with these channels and taking advantage of them, but using them to create social change, whether it's about older folks or about increasing their relevance to a younger Boomer demographic," says Marcus. "It's communicating beyond the boundaries of what you think AARP is."

Broader issues

AARP has always had a presence in policy debates that relate to its members, from the expansion of Medicare Part D to its role as one of the top-spending lobbyists in the 2009

healthcare reform debate. When it began to look to its members for guidance, however, AARP found that issues relating to social change resonated with them.

Donnellan notes "our desire to be much more responsive to the needs of members when it comes to our advocacy work" has been crucial in how AARP has decided which issues to focus on in the coming years.

Amid the economic crisis, many members expressed concern about financial security, prompting AARP to look at issues like investor protections. In October, it launched LifeTuner, a Web site that provides 25- to 35-year-olds with financial tools, community, and advice as a way to address members' concerns about the financial well-being of their children and grandchildren.

"This was driven by research we were doing with our members," says Donnellan of the first-ever AARP initiative targeting this demographic. "They're worried about their kids and their ability to save for retirement."

Donnellan adds that he saw a need to reach more members, as well as broaden outreach to a larger public audience, while using AARP's communication properties to influence member, public, and policymaker opinion.

Multicultural outreach is also becoming more vital, he says, especially as AARP seeks to become the leading information source for people 50 and older and their families.

Although the organization launched its Spanish-language magazine, *Segunda Juventud*, in 2001, it has since created a Spanish-language TV show, a regional radio program that may go national on CBS in 2010, and a Spanish-language version of the AARP site.

In the next year, AARP hopes to place inserts of *Segunda Juventud* in Spanish language papers across the US to further its reach.

"We must do more to really recognize the changing face of the 50-plus demographic and continue to remain relevant to that group," says Donnellan. "We're about enhancing quality of life for all people as we age."

AARP through the years:

1958

Founded by Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus

1982

Merges with the National Retired Teachers Association, lowering membership age from 55 to 50

1999

Launches AARP Services, a set of products and services for members that includes health and long-term-care insurance

2001

Prints first issue of Spanish-language title *Segunda Juventud*; Names Bill Novelli, founder of Porter Novelli, CEO and executive director

2003

Lobbies for the passage of the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act

2007

Creates Divided We Fail, a "strange bedfellows" coalition - including the Business Roundtable, SEIU, and NFIB - to advocate for healthcare reform

2009

President Obama hosts AARP tele-townhall to dispel healthcare reform myths; Launches microsite aimed at 25- to 35-year-olds to help address "legacy" concerns about financial stability for its members' children and grandchildren

Donnellan's career history:

November 2005-present

AARP, EVP and chief communications officer

June 2005-November 2005

AARP, MD of integrated communications

2001-2004

AARP, director, office of grassroots/elections

1997-2001

AARP, director of advocacy and management

1985-2001

AARP, various positions

1980-1985

US House Representative Geraldine Ferraro, executive/legislative assistant