

SPRA

Case Study: Building a Field-Defining Communications Process for an Emerging Community of Practice

Website: <https://www.spra.com/>

Location: Oakland, CA

Industry: Research Services

Function: Social impact capacity building

CHALLENGE

For over 25 years, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) had produced industry-leading evaluation and technical assistance (TA) services for workforce and education agencies. For a data portfolio project, the TA team wanted to help accelerate the shift from data reporting and system building to data use, product development, and insight generation among a community of practice (COP) whose members spanned over a dozen states and with different priorities, and projects of different sizes and levels of maturity.

The project team wanted to position themselves as a valuable hub for the COP—and raise its collective aspirations—but they had limited staffing and capacity to do it.

They hired me to build a market intelligence system to support thought leadership and future-focused TA, and a communications product to help define the COP as more than a



group of stakeholders with a common source of grant funding. The system needed to efficiently track, curate and comment on the activities of their peers across the US and help prioritize field-relevant insights about data and the Future of Work that could be easily (and meaningfully) shared with the COP.



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SOLUTION

1. **Tracking system:** I assembled a system that automatically tracked updates in real time from more than 3,000 organizations and public figures relevant to the team's work.
2. **Publishing system:** I advised them on workflow and software selection to turn the inflow of intelligence into an outflow of community updates and commentary, in the form of a regular newsletter. I performed a SWAT analysis of various editorial strategies and made a tutorial video walking through how all the systems worked together. They then published a newsletter and podcast with commentary, updates on highlighted projects, news stories, events, job openings and more, as a central hub of their community.
3. **Expert Interviews:** I organized 5 expert interviews, 3 they sourced from their peer community and 2 I sourced from my network of influential publishers, and we gathered tips and lessons-learned from newsletters that had gone on to great success.

OUTCOMES

The research and publishing system helped 25 year old SPR to grow its social connections from 25% (LinkedIn) to 125% (Twitter), grow newsletter readership by over 300%, and publish a 5-star podcast over the next 3 years. As importantly,



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polls revealed meaningful changes in the way COP members perceived themselves and their projects, including increased interest in professional development and in ambitious projects within and across member states.

Project Leader Feedback

"We thought we were developing an efficient communications tool—and we did. But Marshall also helped us strengthen our field-level radar and understand the power of organizing intelligence and framing communications that got people excited about the future. These lessons – built on the processes he constructed – have endured long past our project work. It was a stretch to engage outside help at the time, but working with Marshall was one of the best decisions we made."



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