

SPRA

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

"It was a stretch to engage outside help at the time, but working with Marshall was one of the best decisions we made."

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 (SPRA) has produced industry-leading evaluation and technical assistance (TA) services for workforce and education agencies. For a data portfolio project, the 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 Marshall to build a market intelligence system, to support thought leadership and future-focused technical assistance, and a communications product to help define the COP as more than a



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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.

SOLUTION

1. Tracking system

Marshall 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.

This involved mapping the ecosystem, setting up tracking technology to monitor explicit and implicit updates, and helping create a custom workflow that made it easy for SPRA to see the most important updates they wanted to highlight.

2. Publishing system

Marshall advised the organization on workflow and software selection to turn the inflow of intelligence into an outflow of community updates and commentary. They chose to do this through a community newsletter and podcast.

We performed a SWAT analysis of various editorial strategies and thoroughly documented how all the systems worked together. SPRA then published a newsletter and podcast with commentary, updates on highlighted projects, news stories, events, job openings and more, acting as a central hub of their community.



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3. Expert Interviews

We organized 5 expert interviews from my network of world-leading thinkers; interviewees shared tips and lessons-learned from related thought leadership projects that had gone on to great success.

OUTCOMES

The research and publishing system helped the 25 year old organization:

- grow its social connections online from 25% (LinkedIn) to 125% (Twitter)
- grow newsletter readership by over 300%
- and publish a 5-star podcast over the next 3 years.
- Most importantly, community 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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