

ABSEL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Annette L. Halpin
Arcadia University
halpin@arcadia.edu

Sara Viscusi
Arcadia University
sviscusi@arcadia.edu

ABSTRACT

A marketing communications plan (Mar-Com Plan) is proposed for ABSEL to increase participation at its annual meetings and attract more non-conference members. A description of ABSEL and its target markets are presented along with responses from a membership survey administered in 2009. Data on conference attendance and distance travelled to conferences provide additional background and rationale for the recommended plan. A detailed schedule of communication pieces (e-mails and newsletters), their purpose, and intended target audiences is presented along with a suggested timeline.

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS PLANS

Marketing communications are the methods used by organizations to “inform, persuade, and remind consumers – directly or indirectly – about the products and brands they sell” (Kotler & Keller, 2009, p. 470). Integrated marketing communications is the “coordination of every communication from a firm to a target customer to convey a consistent and complete message” (Perreault & McCarthy, p. 322). The process of identifying a target audience, choosing the communication objectives and message, selecting the methods of communication, developing a timeline, and considering budget constraints evolve into a formal document known as a marketing communications plan (Mar-Com Plan) (Kennaugh, 2010). Mar-Com Plans can be thought of as the voice of a company and “must start with a clear target audience in mind” (Kotler & Keller, 2009, p. 476).

A target market is a group of buyers who share common needs that a firm aims to satisfy (Armstrong & Kotler, 2009, p. 177). Narrowing down to a specific target group allows for marketing to be more effective and for a firm to better serve its clients. Demographic factors such as age, gender, and economic status are commonly used to identify target audiences. Once identified, the organization identifies the group’s buying habits and product preferences. In addition, it is helpful to learn how these customers prefer to receive information about product offerings and use information during the buying process (Kennaugh, 2010). De-

veloping a Mar-Com Plan guides an organization in answering the following questions: What should be said? How should we say it? and Who should say it? (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

COMMUNICATION METHODS

Organizations use the following methods of communication with its target markets: advertisements; sales promotions events; public relations; direct marketing; interactive methods; word-of-mouth; and personal selling (Kotler and Keller, 2009) Advertisements can include billboards, brochures, print ads, etc. As with most forms of communication advertising usually requires some type of payment and is considered non-personal since the message is set. While costly, the main benefit to advertising is its ability to reach a large audience with a standard message. Sales promotions, such as rebates, are short-term incentives used to motivate customers to purchase a product.

Events include any activities and/or programs designed to encourage a ‘brand-related interaction’ (Kotler & Keller, 2009, p. 472). This method often combines sales promotion and personal selling. Events can be costly and tend to require a great deal of preparation prior to implementation. Publicity and Public Relations typically revolve around a company’s image and usually involve community activities including press releases, event sponsorship, charitable donations, and consumer information (Fisk, Grove, & John, 2008; Solomon, Marshall & Stuart, 2009). The effective use of public relations as part of a Mar-Com Plan allows for a company to present a positive image to the public. Direct Marketing uses direct lines of communication to reach target audiences. E-mails, Internet, telephone and postal mail are all considered direct forms of communication. Using these methods, the organization can target select groups and tailor messages to specific needs. While direct marketing can be the most costly it is also be the most cost effective because it targets the message and method to an audience.

Interactive marketing is typically Internet-based and used to engage buyers. It includes such methods as mailings, e-mails, blogs, and web sites (Kotler & Keller, 2009, p. 473). It is similar to direct marketing in that it can be

tailored to specific segments of the market. Word-of-mouth, another powerful element of a marketing communications effort, has been described as “the most effective and authentic brand marketing communication method” (Calabro, 2005). It is considered the least expensive form of communication but can be the least controllable. Word-of-mouth can be done either face-to-face or via the Internet and while the cost may be appealing the response can be either positive or negative depending on how the organization is perceived by consumers. Personal Selling is one-on-one communication between the buyer and seller and tends to be face-to-face. Included in this category are presentations, meetings, and appearances at industry trade shows (Kotler & Keller, p. 473). In summary, a successful Mar-Com Plan focuses on the message as well as the method of communication with a target market.

ABOUT ABSEL

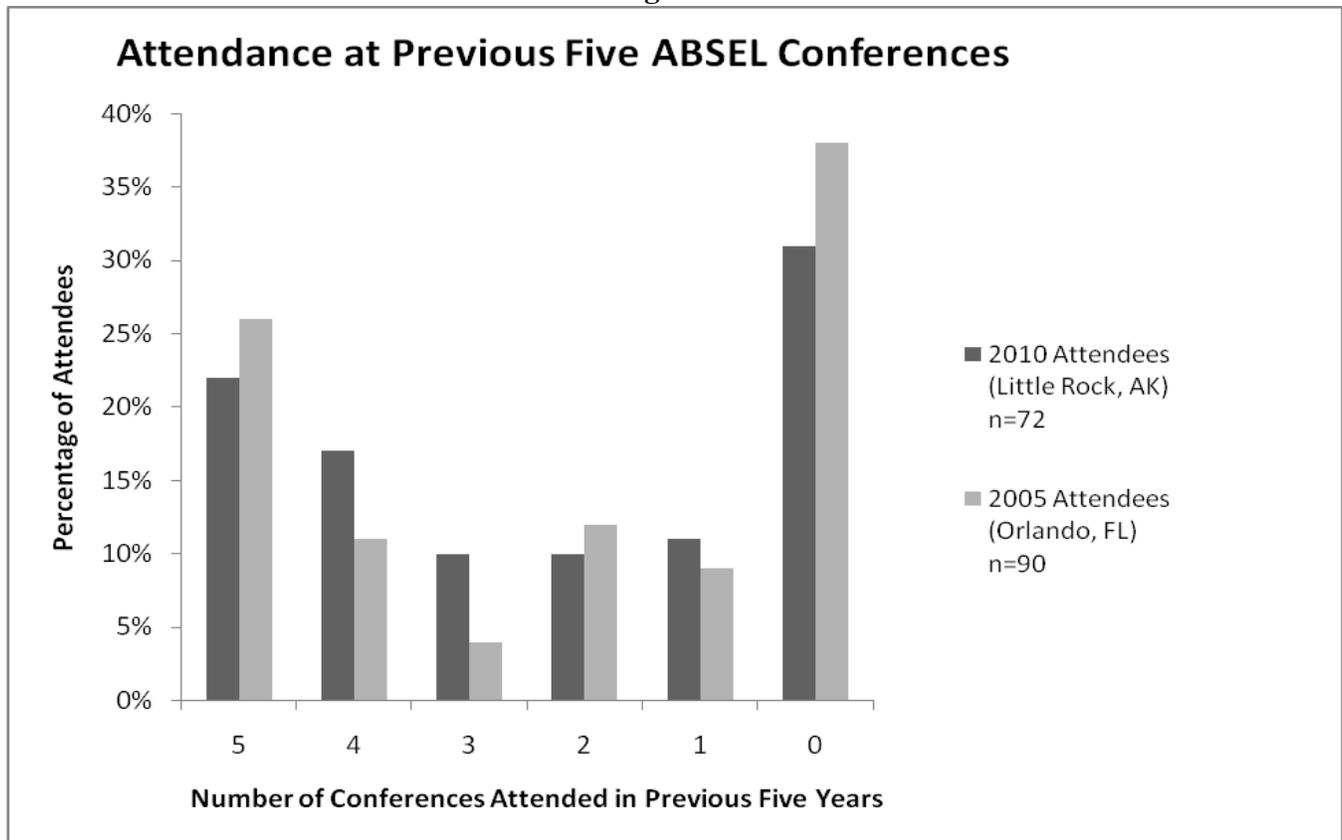
ABSEL is a not-for-profit organization consisting mainly of business professors, consultants, and researchers interested in promoting experiential learning and simulations in the teaching of business concepts. As stated in its mission, the organization’s efforts are intended “to advance learning by encouraging the use, development, research, and assessment of simulations and experiential methods as applicable to the business environment” (www.absel.org).

The organization has been meeting formally each year since it held its first conference in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 1974. The annual meeting offers individuals the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience with others in an intimate setting. Seventy to ninety-five professionals attend the annual meeting each Spring which offers four tracks for papers and presentations. These include: Simulations; Experiential and Innovative Methods; Online Education; and Games (Ready-to-Play) (www.absel.org).

Membership benefits in ABSEL vary depending on one’s level of involvement. Individuals who attend the annual meeting can attend all sessions, receive the Bernie Keys Library (a word-searchable CD-Rom with proceedings from all ABSEL meetings and other publications), and receive a one-year subscription to the journal *Simulation and Gaming*. For those who do not attend the annual conference, there are two levels of involvement. The Full Non-Conference Membership includes the CD-Rom and the journal (\$100) while the Limited Non-Conference Membership includes the CD-Rom only (\$60). ABSEL members are involved either as researchers or users of simulations and experiential learning tools and find that the annual conference provides a supportive setting in which to share their work.

Attendance at ABSEL conferences varies depending on the year and location. The range of attendance in recent years (70-95) has resulted in some uncertainty about the

Figure 1



future of the organization. While the goal of each conference is to attract roughly 100 people, this has yet to be achieved on a consistent basis. Attendee data from the 2010 (Little Rock, Arkansas) and 2005 (Orlando, Florida) conferences provide some insight into the attendance records of conference attendees. Figure 1 (below) shows the percentage of attendees in 2010 and 2005 who participated in ABSEL's conferences in the previous five years. As indicated, of those attending the 2010 conference, 39% attended four or five times in the previous half decade. Of those attending the 2005 conference, the corresponding percentage was 37%. When we include those who attended three or more of the previous five conferences the percentages show more frequent attendance by recent attendees – 49% in 2010 and 41% in 2005. The category representing the single largest percentage of attendees is first-time attendees. Those figures were 31% in 2010 and 38% in 2005.

In reviewing this data it appears that there is a committed core of ABSEL participants yet that number has not been large enough to guarantee conference attendance at a level that strengthens the organization financially and positions it as a leading research body in management education. Attendance in 2005 was strong, twenty-five percent greater than in 2010, perhaps due to location, Florida. More people attended that conference and a higher percentage of attendees was first-time participants (38% versus 31% in 2010). An appealing climate and ease of access by air might be considerations in selecting future conference locations. However, there may be another, more significant factor contributing to the difference in attendance between the two periods. Economic conditions beginning in 2008 and continuing through the current year have resulted in reductions in budgets for faculty travel at many colleges and universities. Consultants are likely to have been affected in similar ways which may account for lower attendance at ABSEL's conference in 2010¹. The proposed Mar-Com Plan suggests that a targeted series of communications is needed to solicit new members and, more importantly, to encourage past members to strengthen their involvement with ABSEL. The authors recommend that the suggested Mar-Com Plan be adopted by ABSEL's board for implementation immediately after the 2011 conference.

ABSEL'S TARGET MARKETS

ABSEL's target markets include business professors, business consultants, game developers, and Business Deans/Department Chairs. In 2009, an electronic survey was administered to recent conference attendees requesting feedback about ABSEL activities (ABSEL, 2009). E-mail addresses for participants were extracted from the database maintained by the Executive Director. Some eighty-eight responses were received yielding the following information.

¹ Attendance in March 2008 (Charleston, SC) and March 2009 (Seattle, WA) was 82 and 74, respectively.

Roughly 83% of attendees view themselves as professors while another 10% classified themselves as entrepreneurs. In response to a question about promotion at their institutions, 'Teaching' was noted as the primary criterion for evaluating faculty (35% of respondents). 'Research' was next (28%) followed closely by 'Teaching and Research' (26%). When asked about the number of years they have been using simulations and experiential exercises, 39% of respondents (33 people) indicated more than 20 years. Roughly 32% have been using these tools for 11 to 20 years while 21% indicated 6-10 years. If this data are representative of the organization as a whole ABSEL members have had a long-term commitment to incorporating simulation and experiential exercises in their teaching of business concepts.

Here are detailed descriptions of each of ABSEL's target markets.

Business Professors. Business professors join ABSEL to learn of hands-on methods to teach business concepts to their students. ABSEL provides a forum to understand and share research conducted on topics related to the development and use of simulations and experiential exercises. At the annual conference this target group is able to interact on a one-on-one basis with professionals who share their interest in developing and using simulations and/or experiential exercises. This target group consists of 60-80 members annually.

Business Consultants. Business consultants participate in ABSEL to understand and share research conducted on topics related to the development and use of simulations and experiential exercises. They learn hands-on methods that can be shared with clients in their consulting practices. Consultants who attend ABSEL's annual conference interact on a one-on-one basis with professionals who share their interest in developing and using simulations and/or experiential exercises. This target group consists of 10-20 members annually.

Game Developers. Game developers participate in ABSEL to understand and share research on the development and use of simulations. They learn how users of their games integrate them into their teaching/training and work with users to improve their products. Game developers who attend ABSEL's annual conference interact on a one-on-one basis with professionals who share their interest in developing and using simulations. This target group consists of 5-15 members annually.

Business Deans/Department Chairs. Business Deans/Department Chairs participate in ABSEL to learn hands-on methods to teach business concepts and to support faculty interested in developing and upgrading their teaching techniques. This segment is also responsible for assessing and reporting student learning outcomes in their programs. Business Deans/Department Chairs who are involved at ABSEL share an interest in the development and use of simulations and/or experiential exercises. This target group consists of 5-15 members annually.

ABSEL'S CURRENT METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

Currently ABSEL uses its website (www.absel.org), e-mail, and occasional advertisements in the journal *Simulation and Gaming* to connect with its target groups. While these techniques have been cost effective and, to some degree, successful, it does not appear that these methods are adequate to stimulate growth in the organization and improve conference attendance, paper submissions, and/or membership. With these goals in mind, the following communications effort is proposed.

ABSEL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

The major goal of ABSEL's marketing communications plan (Mar-Com Plan) is to attract a greater number of people from each target group to become members. The focus is on generating a greater number of paper submissions each year, increasing overall attendance at the annual conferences, and attracting more non-conference members. Additionally, keeping existing members connected with ABSEL year after year is another goal of this effort.

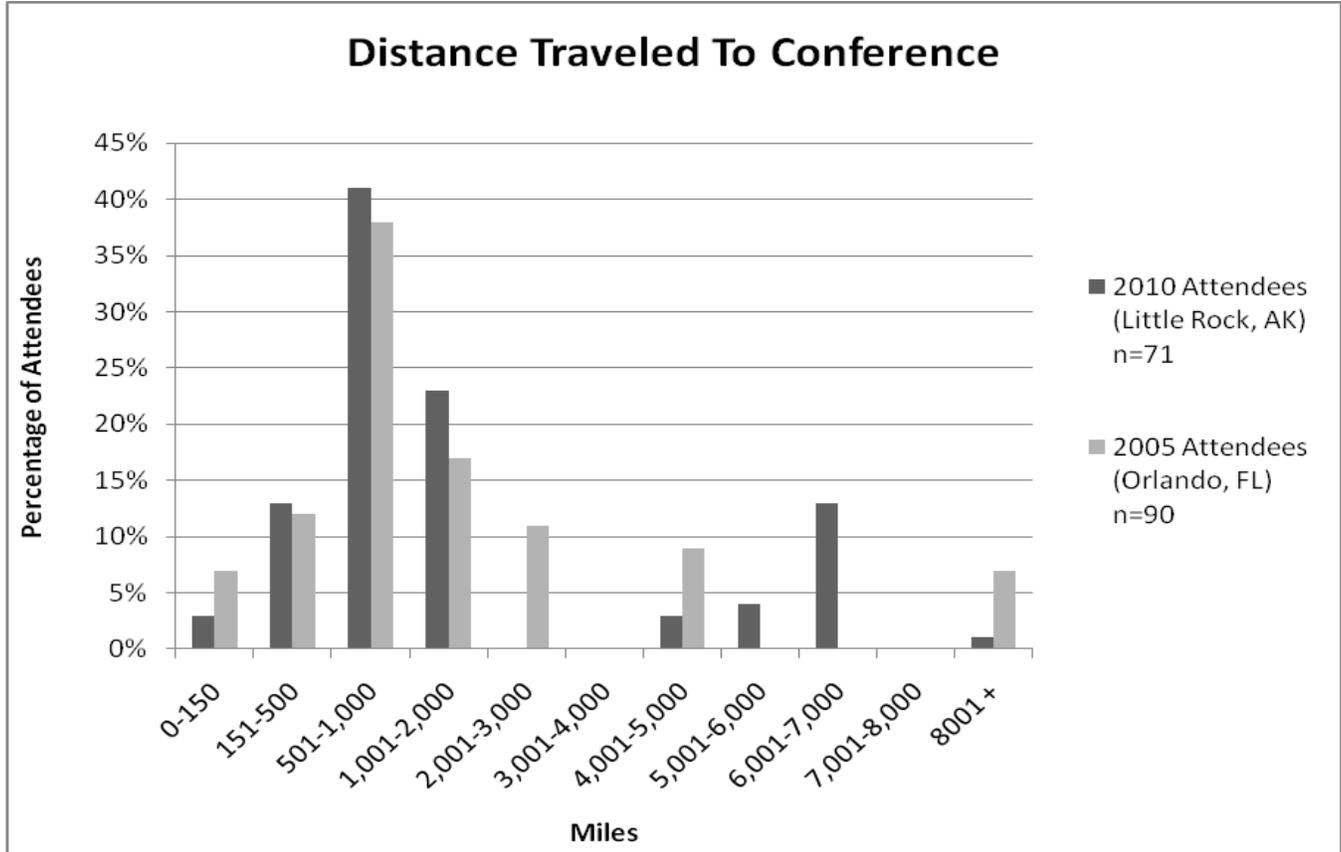
Feedback from the 2009 survey indicates that a lack of economic resources at home institutions, distance to ABSEL conferences, and attractiveness of conference location

may contribute to members not participating on a consistent basis. Since many professors receive support for attending only one conference per year, ABSEL is sometimes viewed as a 'secondary' conference, not the first choice by its membership. In the 2009 survey noted above, 49% of respondents agreed in some way to the following statement, "My travel budget is very limited and if I attend an ABSEL conference, I cannot attend another national meeting". Without adequate funding, professors lack the economic resources to attend one or even two conferences on their own. This is one of ABSEL's greatest challenges - to convince professors and deans that involvement in ABSEL is a worthwhile endeavor. The message must be clear. With a focus on teaching pedagogy and student engagement, professors, students, deans, and institutions benefit greatly from research conducted at ABSEL.

Travel distance to ABSEL's conference has sometimes been cited as a challenge for attendees since greater distance tends to correspond with greater travel expenses. Figure 2 (below) shows distance travelled by attendees for the 2010 and 2005 conferences. In 2010, 71 of 72 attendees supplied address information. In 2005, all attendees (90) supplied information.

In 2010 the average miles traveled to Little Rock was 1,932 miles. Three percent of attendees travelled between 0 and 150 miles and 13% came a distance of 151 to 500

Figure 2



miles (16% travelled 500 miles or less). The longest distance travelled by anyone to Little Rock was 8,154 miles. In 2005, average miles travelled was 1,829, roughly the same as in 2010. Seven percent travelled between 0 and 150 miles and 12% came a distance of 151 to 500 miles (19% travelled 500 miles or less). In each year, the largest percentage of people travelled between 501 and 1,000 miles to attend the conference (41% and 38%, respectively). As evidenced from attendance figures presented in Figure 1 (above) there is a core group of ABSEL members willing to travel to the annual conference regardless of location. However, this number is below a level needed to sustain ABSEL long-term. From the data in Figure 2, there appears to be an untapped segment of the market that might find ABSEL an attractive professional association. The percentage of attendees traveling 150 miles or less constitutes a small proportion of those attending ABSEL (less than 8% each year). A focused communication plan targeting professionals in the immediate area of the conference might prove beneficial.

The communications methods that best suit the capabilities and resources of ABSEL include direct marketing, interactive marketing, and word-of-mouth marketing. Direct marketing (e-mails) is the most cost effective method and should work well considering ABSEL's limited budget for promotion. Interactive Marketing and word-of-mouth marketing are also cost effective and can generate interest in the organization with the use of referral programs, testimonials, and internet communications like blogs (Calabro, 2005).

In formulating a Mar-Com Plan for ABSEL, the following three categories were developed for classifying ABSEL participants and generating lists of objectives:

- Conference Attendees (Business Professors and Consultants)
 - First Time
 - Multi-Year
- Accepted Authors
- Business Deans/Chairs of Business Programs

OBJECTIVES OF ABSEL'S MAR-COM PLAN

- Conference Attendees (Business Professors and Consultants)
 - First-Time
 - § Recognize their attendance for the first time
 - § Solicit paper submission for next conference
 - § Encourage conference attendance in following years
 - § Further their understanding of the value of simulations and experiential exercises
 - § Provide methods of connecting with other ABSEL members
 - Multi-Year
 - § Recognize multi-year attendance
 - § Solicit paper submission for next conference

- § Request participation as reviewer of submitted papers
- § Encourage conference attendance in following year
- § Request participation in governance of ABSEL
- § Encourage conference attendance in following year
- § Further their understanding of the value of simulations and experiential exercises
- § Provide methods of connecting with other ABSEL members

- Accepted Authors

- § Notify authors that paper/presentation was accepted
- § Request that paper/presentation document be prepared using guidelines for publication in Bernie Keys Library (BKL)
- § Inform authors that one author must attend conference
- § Encourage conference attendance by all authors

- Business Deans/Chairs of Business Programs

- § Introduce ABSEL to these administrators
- § Suggest that faculty development funds are appropriate to use to support learning about simulations and experiential exercises
- § Promote the savings on travel for institutions local to the conference
- § Request that Deans/Chairs encourage their faculty to submit papers for the annual conference
- § Encourage attendance by faculty members who want to learn more incorporating simulations and experiential learning into their business curriculum
- § Further their understanding of the value of simulations and experiential exercises

METHODS AND TIMING OF COMMUNICATIONS

The methods of communication recommended for use by ABSEL include e-mails, newsletters, the organization's website, and the journal *Simulation and Gaming*. E-mails are a fast and cost-effective method of communicating with current and prospective members. Newsletters provide general non-targeted information about simulations, experiential exercises, teaching methodologies, and issues in higher education (related to business programs). They can also include solicitations for member participation in ABSEL activities (conference paper reviewer, track chair, board membership, etc.) and reminders about upcoming confer-

ences. ABSEL's website should be the primary source of information for current and prospective members. All other communication methods should drive viewers to the website where organization information is provided. The journal *Simulation & Gaming* provides advertising space to ABSEL once per year at no charge. The message in this ad should be related to the annual conference and include link to ABSEL's website where they can learn more about the organization.

Table 1 (below) displays ABSEL's Communications Timeline for e-mails and newsletters to each of its target groups. This correspondence will originate from the President of ABSEL and require the involvement of ABSEL's board to develop, implement, and manage it successfully. Many of these items are time sensitive since the information refers to deadlines for paper submissions, conference registration, etc. At ABSEL's 2011 conference in Pensacola, Florida the authors will present to ABSEL's board a flash drive with drafts of all proposed e-mails and a template for the newsletter. If approved, communication with each target group can begin March 31, 2011.

CONCLUSION

ABSEL has an impressive history of research in and experience with simulations and experiential learning in business education. Building on this tradition, the organization has an opportunity to strengthen its membership by adopting the recommended Mar-Com Plan. This document offers guidelines to ABSEL's leaders by describing each target group, suggesting which messages to create, and proposing a timeline for each communication. In addition to adopting a more formal approach to communicating with its members, ABSEL might consider the following when planning its annual conference - schedule conferences in more densely populated areas to benefit from greater numbers of professionals and business programs and/or consider locations that provide vacation opportunities for ABSEL members and their families. As an additional suggestion, creating ties with institutions whose missions indicate a commitment to teaching excellence will benefit ABSEL as it seeks to become larger and more recognized for its work.

The adoption of a Mar-Com Plan, while potentially valuable, cannot replace what is essential to any organization's success, offering a product of value to a market. As stated by T. Yeshin (2004, p.3), "Marketing communication represents the single most important opportunity for companies to convince potential consumers of the superiority of their products and services". ABSEL's record of developing and using innovative methods in the teaching of business is central to why the organization exists. This must be its primary message.

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ABSEL's Communications Timeline
Table 1

Schedule of E-Mails and Newsletters				
	First Time Attendees (Members & Consultants)	Multi-Year Attendees (Members & Consultants)	Accepted Authors	Business Deans/ Chairs
March 31	First Time Attendee Thank You	Thank You for Attending Conference	Thank You for Submitting/ Pre-sending Paper	Thank You for Attending/Sending Faculty to Conference
April 1	Call for Papers	Call for Papers	Call for Papers	Intro. to ABSEL
May 1	Call for Papers Reminder; Newsletter 1	Call for Papers Reminder; Newsletter 1	Call for Papers Reminder; Newsletter 1	Call for Papers; Newsletter 1
June 1	Call for Papers Reminder	Call for Papers Reminder	Call for Papers Reminder	Call for Papers Reminder
July 1	Call for Papers Reminder; Link to Conference Information on Website	Call for Papers Reminder; Link to Conference Information on Website	Call for Papers Reminder; Link to Conference Information on Website	Call for Papers Reminder; Link to Conference Information on Website
Aug 1	July Repeat	July Repeat	July Repeat	July Repeat
September 1	Paper Due Date; Link to Submission Instructions on Website; Newsletter 2	Paper Due Date; Link to Submission Instructions on Website; Newsletter 2	Paper Due Date; Link to Submission Instructions on Website; Newsletter 2	Paper Due Date; Link to Submission Instructions on Website; Newsletter 2
October 1	September Repeat	September Repeat	September Repeat	September Repeat
November 1	Urgent – Submission Deadline & Links	Urgent – Submission Deadline & Links	Urgent – Submission Deadline & Links	Urgent – Submission Deadline & Links
1 Week Prior to Paper Submission Deadline	November 1 Repeat	November 1 Repeat	November 1 Repeat	November 1 Repeat
December 1	Conference Registration Information – Link to Website	Conference Registration Information – Link to Website	Congratulations on Acceptance; Paper Revision and Sub-mission Guidelines/ Due Date	Conference Registration Information – Link to Website
December 15	Conference Registration and Hotel Information – Deadline; Link to Website	Conference Registration and Hotel Information – Deadline; Link to Website	Conference Registration and Hotel Information – Deadline ;One Author Must Attend; Link to Website	Conference Registration and Hotel Information – Deadline; Link to Website
January 1	December 15 Repeat/ Newsletter 3	December 15 Repeat/ Newsletter 3	December 15 Repeat/ Newsletter 3	December 15 Repeat/ Newsletter 3
February 1	Urgent - Conference and Hotel Registration Deadlines	Urgent - Conference and Hotel Registration Deadlines	Urgent - Conference and Hotel Registration Deadlines	Urgent - Conference and Hotel Registration Deadlines
March 1	February Repeat	February Repeat	February Repeat	February Repeat