



Keys to Advocating on Behalf of Your Members

When an economy is growing and business is booming, the value created by a professional association can sometimes be taken for granted by its members. Over the past few years, in the midst of a declining economy and a growing unemployment rate, members of professional associations are looking more than ever to their association for help in how to maintain (or better yet, grow) their business. One area which members are continuing to place an increased importance on is the need for advocacy – the association’s active involvement with government officials to change industry regulations at the local, state and national level. There are three basic requirements which should be examined by all associations to ensure it is meeting the needs of at least a majority of its membership:

1. Understanding the issues that are most important to the majority of members;
2. Efficiently using association resources in advocacy efforts;
3. Effectively communicating the results to members (successes *and* failures).

One of the common issues facing many associations today is misunderstanding the members’ critical advocacy needs. In part, this can be due to a disconnect between the association’s Board, which may have one set of interests, and the membership, which may have another set of interests; but many times there is simply a lack of conversation between the association and its members. Either way, communication is vital to the success of advocacy efforts.

A potential solution to this common issue is to establish a volunteer committee that is separate from the Board and executive committee. The purpose of this committee is to understand the specific issues members are facing, how it impacts the members and the association as a whole; discuss the pros and cons of advocating either for or against particular issues, or not doing anything at all. Given the variety of political stances within a membership, not all views will be represented in a particular issue, but the extent to which the minority’s voice is heard and understood, the more positive feedback the association will receive. Another challenge facing associations can be a segment of the membership who wishes the association would not be involved in government affairs. Although advocacy is less important to this group, it is still imperative to engage individuals who fit this profile.

Once the specific issues are recognized, members are looking more than ever for returns on their advocacy investments. In most associations, advocacy resources are included in the association’s budget, and thus included as part of a member’s dues. With resources tightening over the past few years and the clamor for more transparency increasing, associations should make effective use of its time and money investments in specific causes. If an association puts money into advocating for an issue that is either not important or is not on the side “voted” upon by the majority, the association could face a significant decrease in member loyalty, engagement, and perception of value. Conversely, if an association succeeds in its efforts, members can feel an increased sense of loyalty, may be more likely to be involved in future efforts, and will see the value of the efforts.

In recent association studies conducted by the Loyalty Research Center, members were asked to distribute a hypothetical \$100 across a list of advocacy issues (amount decided upon to make the exercise as “respondent friendly” as possible). They were instructed to allocate more dollars to the issues that were most important to them. The Board was given the same allocation exercise and the results were compared. In one association, the member results matched the Board results, affirming their positions and recommended direction of the efforts. However, in another association, the allocations drastically differed between the membership and the Board. The latter represents a potential problem down the road if communication between the two groups does not change.

Finally, advocacy efforts must be communicated to keep members engaged. In a study conducted in the past two years with a local association, 38% of members were not aware that their association was involved in a significant change in state law. Given the low awareness among members, the association needs to look at their communications process. Was this a case of not communicating their efforts, or possibly not communicating in the manner that their members prefer receiving information from the association? If they did not communicate their efforts, the association missed a great opportunity to communicate what and why they were advocating for the change in the law and what it meant to the membership; i.e. how did the members benefit from the change in law. If they did communicate their efforts but it did not catch their members' attention, it might be time to do a communications audit (especially with all the social media communication tools available) to understand member preferences for learning about association events and news (including advocacy efforts).

In the case of a failed advocacy effort, it is also important to inform the membership of the failed efforts, what they learned from it, and what they plan to do going forward on the particular issue as far as dropping the issue altogether or regrouping and continuing the fight. This would be a great opportunity to recruit member volunteers to join in the advocacy efforts.

As we have explained in previous white papers, member involvement (along with non-dues revenue) is becoming a significant behavioral measure to tie to member loyalty. By engaging members in advocacy efforts, an association can improve the strength of the relationship with members and create more opportunities for members to become engaged in various aspects of the association.

For more information on understanding members' perceptions of advocacy within your association, or on conducting member surveys or communications audits for your association, please contact Matt Braun, Association Practice Leader at the Loyalty Research Center, at 317-466-5035 or mbraun@loyaltyresearch.com.