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Commentary

Expanding and integrating your government relations programs

GR can be good for an assn's health

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Actions impacting your organization by federal, state and local elected officials, their staffs and government bureaucrats can be a “gold mine” for assn services in membership, public relations, education and a host of areas not traditionally utilized for these purposes.

For example, a bill is introduced that would help sales and marketing for the membership. The lobbyist has worked hard to secure the sponsor, network the staff and check it out with the government agency that would be responsible for implementing the law. Aside from the reporting on this miraculous event, sending some letters out for support within the legislature as the lobbyist instructs, what else can you do? Let’s look at some alternatives:

Energize the public relations “team,” good PR in newspapers, publications spreads good will and positive feelings about the group. Alert suppliers, customers and the public outside the immediate assn “family” on how this legislation can impact them.

A special membership recruitment drive can be implemented targeting those entities not yet members – explaining how they would be impacted, and how important it is to join. Some potential members may join because the legislation is adverse to their interests. Some join because they did not know about the efforts and want to take advantage of it. Regardless of the reasons, membership is rarely targeted to be in sync with government relations. Fine tuning the activities can bolster membership drives significantly.

Educating the members on legislation and policies can be from different perspectives. A seminar, briefing books, speakers, a whole host of educational materials might be made available on issues that interest the members and allies. All too often legislation that is introduced impacts across retail, wholesale and manufacturer lines not to mention the customer or clients. Education can also be used within the assn with state affiliates and local chapters.

Let’s keep on the same bill. What other areas can be used?

How about industry relations? When a bill is introduced that could help retailers sell more product, manufacturers and suppliers should be informed and kept abreast of legislative developments. They might even be encouraged to support the bill’s passage. After all, the manufacturers can also benefit from increased sales. This interaction is at the heart of industry relations and expanding programs that manufacturers or suppliers could support economically for our “fictional” retail group.

Another overlooked area includes allied assn relationships. Most groups have similar organizations in and around its periphery that appeal to a different, but similar membership. Everyone fights for market share, including membership within assns. Informing these groups might be beneficial to both organizations – it might even lead to mergers if one group believes the other is doing more for their members. Many assns can use related groups to communicate on mutual issues and legislation is just one. Getting various disparate groups together on legislative issues can result in trade show, membership and many other benefits not usually recognized.

Anything else? You bet. “Branding” the assn as the “go to” group for this issue in the legislature and government will have many benefits on a wide range of subjects. If the group is highly regulated by the government, or the legislature is involved in the industry in other ways, having a high profile bill or supporting (opposing) legislation can be very important for branding the assn as the experts to go to for answers by elected officials and their staffs, not to mention government workers. Often this will result in all of these groups seeking out the assn before issues take hold. That is powerful and branding the issues and inter-relating them to your group is a good direction to pursue.

Returning to our bill: We have now utilized the following areas within the assn:

- membership recruitment
- education
- public relations
- industry relations
- intra-industry assn relations

All too often, government relations remains a small part of the overall assn services and project priorities. Changing this dynamic can have direct and important results for each and every group that takes the time to plan out their strategic “GR” objectives.

To tie it all together, GR projects can best be utilized in all of these areas, by having the GR committee, the in-house out outside lobbyist, the board, and the membership:

- support introduction of “your own assn’s” legislation or policy
- support another bill (or policy) that would impact the membership in a good way, and
- oppose legislation (or policy) adversely impacting the membership.

Government relations, whether at the federal, state or local levels, can have a great impact on the health and economic viability of an assn. By figuring out how to use this benefit, in can work “miracles” in more ways than one!

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