

# **Making Your Chamber Make a Difference**

**How to Initiate & Re-engineer  
Public Affairs Programs  
for Chambers of Commerce**

**Introduction, Chapter 1 through 10, & Conclusion**

Mick Fleming, President  
American Chamber of Commerce Executives

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# Making Your Chamber Make a Difference

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## INTRODUCTION

### “All politics is local.”

Tip O’Neill was right. Public policy is created and changed to satisfy the pushes and pulls of local constituencies - not necessarily majorities, but constituencies. Most of the positions staked and votes taken in legislative chambers still have less to do with personal commitment to ideals than with concerns about the anticipated reaction of important local constituencies.

When trying to create new directions and policies, or to block proposed change, it’s clear that selling ideas on Main Street - in home districts - is at least as important as selling them in the hallowed halls of Harrisburg, Sacramento or Washington.

How do we know? Evidence is everywhere:

- The blunder of President and Hillary Clinton in trying to shape a new health care policy for the nation may be the most vivid example. Here, a major policy battle was fought (and won) at the local diners and in pediatricians’ waiting rooms, while the administration’s policy wonks thought the action was in the Senate hearing rooms.
- It is widely considered political suicide in Washington to go up against the AARP, with its nationwide network of *local* “Gray Power” cells.
- Increasingly, the so-called Christian right is running its candidates for local school boards and various elected county posts - and winning. They recognize that controlling national and state politics follows control at the local level.
- National gaming lobbyists know that their attempts to secure gambling amendments to state constitutions (or to prevent them) are largely won or lost based on their ability to mobilize effective grassroots organizations and alliances in a few key legislative districts.

Whether the issues are national, state or regional, the trend among those aiming to influence and change policy is unquestionably toward greater reliance on effective grassroots lobbying, built around networks of motivated, local, allied organizations. One of the most powerful real estate lobbyists in Washington has noted: The members of Congress are not going to vote this way or that way because I tell them. They are going to vote because it’s good for the district - which means good for them.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether you have realized it or not, the process is focusing on you, both from the bottom up and from the top down. As a chamber of commerce, you are the representative of hundreds, perhaps thousands of influential constituents. Politically, your organization can be in the driver’s seat. The question is: Are you ready to be a major part of this process, or will you watch as other players take center stage in your region?

To reach your potential as a power player in the game of influencing public policy, your chamber needs a few tools and lot of motivation. We’ll try to offer a bit of both.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest & Elizabeth Wittenberg, “How To Win In Washington”, p.44

***Before we begin, a few notes...***

In this book, the term chamber of commerce is used to refer to any regional or local, heterogeneous employer organization. The community's construction industry council is not a chamber of commerce, but for this publication, we are counting the county business association, metro partnership or employers' alliance as a chamber.

You'll find that a number of terms are used interchangeably as labels for the kind of work being discussed in this book, and for the entities that perform this work: Public affairs department policy work, government affairs operation, lobbying team, public policy committee, legislative relations ...For our purposes all of these terms refer to the same thing:

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**An active, sustained effort by staff and a group of volunteers of the chamber aimed at representing the organization, its mission and its members to government officials.**

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This material is a menu rather than a catechism. These options and ideas will not suit every political setting, organizational structure or budget. All of these ideas, however, have come directly from processes and programs already at work in a chamber or association. Pick and choose the programs and ideas that might work for your organization. Some initiatives will seem unrealistic, overly ambitious or downright impossible in your circumstances. Others will appear obvious. Hopefully, you'll find an idea or two that can help you improve at least one aspect of your current efforts in the government relations arena.

Realize that creating and operating a successful government affairs function for your organization is not a one-shot, short-term undertaking. Someone, with his tongue nowhere near his cheek, called it a 'life sentence,' but this kind of work can be rewarding and, unbelievably, fun for you and your members.

Planning is good. Action is better. Sometimes, the best way to invigorate a function or organization is to do something. While you're evaluating, planning and discussing a new public affairs mission for your organization, try kick-starting the process with a few of the items below.

***Ten things you can do right away (at no cost) to get your government affairs program started and/or turned around:***

- 1. Look at your newsletter and find one way that you could use that publication more effectively to inform your members about government activities or issues.*
- 2. Add one more elected or appointed government official to the roster of member programs (events) you run each year.*
- 3. Sit down with one friend or acquaintance from government and one well-respected member (not at the same meeting) to ask them what they think of your current government relations activities. If you don't really have any activities, ask these two people to name the individuals or groups in your region who do the best job influencing government officials. Go talk to those people!*
- 4. Add one item to your membership sales and marketing materials about the work you do, or plan to do, in the public policy arena.*
- 5. Take a business reporter or political beat editor out to breakfast.*

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6. *Form a short-term task force of your members to examine a public policy concern in the community or region. Have the task force report to your board each month.*
7. *Face-to-face or voice-to-voice, ask three of your members who have never taken part in any government relations activity to write a letter to an elected official. Keep asking until you get three to actually do it.*
8. *Diagram a flow chart showing the steps you go through to come up with a chamber position on a piece of legislation or administrative action. If you don't currently take positions, make a list of all the people you would have to get sign-off from, if you were to want to take a position.*
9. *Pick out two items from your legislative program or policy wish list. On the back of two of your business cards, write the reasons it is important to secure these policy changes. If you can't explain your point on the back of your business card, you don't have a clear message.*
10. *Identify a chamber that you think handles government affairs well (more effectively than you do) and pay them a visit to discuss their activities and processes.*

# CHAPTER 1

## Why Chambers Must Be Involved

### Making the Commitment

One of the most difficult things about working in an association environment is the changing nature of the organization's priority list. One week, the most important thing is leadership development. The next week, because one board member speaks louder than others at the board meeting, the top priority becomes tourism promotion. Often it's tough to know who or what you are, and what you are really meant to be doing.

Sometimes, it is important to revisit definitions and missions. What is a chamber of commerce? What is it that the framers had in mind when they started your organization? So much of the time, we are caught up in the business of the chamber, or in the daily, weekly and monthly crises of running the place, that we lose sight of what we are.

The definition of "chamber of commerce," according to Webster's, is not as loose and vague as you might think:

**"Chamber of Commerce An association to protect the interests of business."**

That's it. Simple, huh? Okay, if that's the definition, those eight words should also, in large part, define the mission. Protect the interests of business. What are those interests and how do you promote and protect them?

Bill Matthews, former Chief Executive Officer of Oneida, Ltd., had a great line he used when answering a question about why he is so personally involved in his state's political life. He says: "What happens in Albany and Washington has as much to do with my company's bottom line as anything my competitors or vendors can do to me."

That may be scary, but it's true. Here's a guy who ran the largest silver and dinnerware company in the country, who competed with scores of foreign competitors and dealt with hundreds of internal and external problems. If you, as a chamber of commerce, really want to protect and promote the interests of people like him, you had better be involved in the things that affect the bottom line. His counterparts in your membership are telling you what those things are. Saving them \$3 on their next rental car might be a nice perk; it won't win their hearts and minds to your cause!

And, the importance of advocacy work to protect and promote the interests of business is not just an issue for large employers. Small business is even more disenfranchised and a less-recognized constituency than corporate America. Virtually nobody is protecting small employers' interests at the state and local levels except you. How effectively are you doing it?

If you are going to fulfill the basic objective of a chamber of commerce, you must focus on *protecting business interests*. If you're looking for where to effectively do that, you must look to the halls of government.

## ***To be or not to be... involved***

Why do chambers maintain high levels of involvement in policy work? And, why do they avoid getting involved in these kinds of activities?

First, let's look at the negative. The reasons that people, especially business people, and their representative organizations shy away from getting involved in public affairs.

Getting involved can make anyone feel inadequate. After all, all of those insiders seem to know the issues and how the system works so well ...and we don't! Democracy is also painfully slow more so when the policies being sought are not popular and populist. Many of us got into association work because things are vibrant, always changing and moving, but watching laws and new policies being made resembles watching paint dry. Success in government relations is also so darn difficult to quantify and measure. It's sometimes hard to even know yourself when you come out on top. Many chambers, both at the board and staff levels, are justifiably timid. They worry about their reputations and their bottom lines. Finally, in terms of time, money or both, involvement in public affairs can eat up resources.

Chances are, if you get up the nerve at a formal or informal meeting of your members to ask the question about why they didn't take part in the business lobbying day at the capital, or why they didn't show up to give testimony about the county tax hike, the universal answer will be that they didn't have time. *I don't have time to be involved in government affairs.* What does that mean and what are your volunteers, or, more accurately, non-volunteers really saying?

If the city attempted to pass a law that would outlaw delivery vehicles on the street in which someone's business was located, would they have time to engage in government affairs? If the state was deliberating passage of a bill that would impose a new \$5,000 per employee payroll tax, would lobbying be a priority?

In reality, when members say they don't have time, they are really saying that they won't make time. They have not been convinced of the importance of the issue to themselves or their businesses. They perceive the issue as primarily someone else's job to lobby ...probably yours! And, they have no confidence that anything they do will have any effect on the outcome, so they might as well spend time on something that is productive.

The primary objective of the communications and recruiting efforts described later in this publication is the destruction of these myths. You will not convince all of your members, or even the majority of your members, that making time for public affairs is worth the effort. Luckily, all you need is a relatively few "believers" to achieve the desired results.

For both the individual and the organization, there are plenty of reasons *why not*, but there are also pressing reasons *why* the members, and you, *should* get involved. Why does a chamber get fully involved in public policy work?

- The organization never left the original mission and, by tradition or design, continues to serve as an association to protect the interests of business.
- The chamber is forced because of one unavoidable, large issue (might include a local economic crisis or a divisive issue in the community) to take part. After getting involved in this one issue, the organization stays active.

- A powerful board member in the organization has a personal commitment to public policy activity and uses the position on the board to keep the chamber involved.
- The chief executive happens to be interested in policy work himself and is persuasive and effective enough that his board allows him do it.
- The board of directors realizes, either because of competitive pressures from a potential rival organization, or because of obvious demand by members, that it had better fulfill this role if it's going to satisfy and retain its membership.

### ***Responding to demand***

As you get started, or re-started, keep in mind that, in the public policy activity area, just as in all of the work of your chamber, you must remain ***demand-driven***. Within the rosters of most organizations, there is a largely unspoken craving to be more involved in shaping the policies that build the economy. The secret is to find the members of your silent minority and provide them with outlets and direction.

“(America) is a place where people need only the flimsiest hint of a shared interest to clump together like iron filings on a magnet. As DeTocqueville and other observers have noted, there seems to be no activity, endeavor, condition, passion, peeve or state of mind in America which lacks an institutional base to rally the faithful and carry the torch.”<sup>2</sup>

Part of determining the level of demand in your chamber consists of finding the hint of shared interest around which your members are just dying to cluster. Want to find unspoken demand? It manifests itself every week through grouching during phone conversations with you and your staff about “that damned city manager.” It shows up in complaints at board meeting and during embarrassing outbursts at public events when elected officials are on hand. Or, the demand might even be showing itself more subtly through apathy among your more prominent board members. When your directors with good titles from larger companies seem bored, unwilling to attend regular board meetings and otherwise act like they're just doing their duty, it might be a sign that they want something more substantive to work on.

However it manifests itself, your job is to harness the demand for public policy activity and give it an avenue for productive release. Your job is not, unless you are suicidal, to try to *drag* your board and your members into the arena of government relations. Look for the demand. Respond to it when you see it. Kindle it when you can.

### ***Support from your board***

Eventually, you'll have to get not just the board's grudging “OK” for greater involvement in public affairs, but their actual *enthusiasm* for taking on a larger role. This doesn't mean you have to manipulate them, but it does mean that you, along with the directors who believe in the idea, will have to sell policy involvement to the full board and to your largest member companies. These people, after all, do tend to pay a large portion of the bills!

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**You need a program, not a campaign.**

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Remember you're not requesting approval for a pilot or a short-term project. To be successful, you need a

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<sup>2</sup> Cullen Murphy “Busy, Busy, Busy,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1994 (On-Line),

program, not a campaign. To get the board on board, you need to make your involvement visible and formal. For you, or a senior member of your staff, government relations must be high on the written priority list, the time card and the annual work plan. You should even make it part of your personal evaluation criteria. Set the whole concept and plan out in written goals that your chairman and executive committee (as well as other staff people) can see.

To secure the interest and support of your board, it is very helpful to make public affairs work a budget item. In the beginning, you might just show it as a percentage of other expenses, e.g. five percent of the organization's overall printing and postage line is earmarked for distribution of policy-related materials. Ten percent of secretarial expenses are targeted to manage grassroots communications with members, etc.

If a line is in the budget (especially if it is new), the board will talk about it - perhaps even debate it. This is a good thing! The only way to be responding to the board's orders is for the orders to actually be given. Debates about the public affairs budget will eventually result in direction for you. Discussion of the new or growing line in the budget will lead to an endorsement, blessing or order to pursue this area of work. If it doesn't, spend six months discussing the concept outside of board meetings and bring it up again when the budget for the following year is discussed. Additional information about financing government relations activities can be found in Chapter 10.

Bringing the board of directors around to the idea is best accomplished behind the scenes, not at full meetings of the board. Visit with them one at a time to discuss their perception of what the chamber should be doing in this arena. Whenever a neighboring chamber of similar size demonstrates a public policy trait you think your organization should be emulating, describe it to one or two board members when you see them at the local diner, or at the hospital's black tie dinner. Encourage the members of your board who share your desire for more involvement to express themselves on the topic. You can't create demand, but you can certainly help your members recognize their unexpressed craving for an expanded role.

## CHAPTER 2

### Defining the Envelope

#### Who decides all this stuff?

If fiscal policies and practices are the most delicate facet of the relationship between boards of directors and chamber chief executives, then government relations is a close second. Defining the envelopes, in terms of the kinds of issues the chamber will take on, and how far you will go in expressing positions - not to mention whose job it is to express them - is tricky work. Operating without such definitions, however, is much like jumping off the bridge, without knowing the length of the bungee cord.

What does the board do? What can the staff do on its own? If you form a government relations committee, what do you do with them? How much does the organization want to lead, as opposed to follow?

For organizations having trouble getting their government relations activities on track, it is more important to *define* the envelopes, than to *push* them. Later on, you may want to stretch the bounds of independence for one entity or another. Start with definitions and work on incremental changes in those definitions as needed and deserved.

The best exercise for securing the allowable ranges of opinion and action from your board is to take a few minutes at a board meeting to ask a few hypothetical questions. With four or five what-if questions you can find out just about all you need to know concerning the limits to your authority and the chamber's willingness to take risks. After you've heard the responses to these questions, draw up a page or two about what you think you heard and share it with directors at the next meeting. Try bringing in an outsider, perhaps even a government official, to look at your list of policy parameters.

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**Start with parameters that everyone agrees on, then  
reshape and stretch them in the future.**

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One new chamber president wanted to find out in a hurry where he and the organization stood in terms of being out on the leading edge of politically sensitive issues. Well in advance, he told his chairman to be ready because he was going to deliberately propose something radical at the next meeting. During that meeting, he circulated a draft of a letter to the county executive on a very controversial issue.

The reaction of the board to the idea of the chamber getting involved in the issue at all (they had studiously avoided touchy issues in the past), as well as to the tactic of writing a *hot* letter to the county exec, told the new chamber executive most of what he wanted to know about the limits of his power and the risk-taking inclinations of his organization.

*Note: it is very important that your chairman be brought in on your plan prior to a presentation of this type, in order to make sure the board doesn't think your letter qualifies you for referral to a dry-out center.*

What follows is a simple grid, designed by a small county chamber, to provide some basic parameters for all of the parties to the chamber's government relations process. It illustrates how simple it can be to spell out general guidelines. The chamber is constantly fine-tuning the language in each of these boxes, in

order to make it clearer and more helpful to members.

By design, your organization will have its own set of rules, criteria and action steps, but spelling out each party's roles and responsibilities is a step you should take right up front.

<b>PROPOSED PARAMETERS FOR GOVT. AFFAIRS COMMITTEE</b>			
	<b>COMMITTEE</b>	<b>BOARD</b>	<b>STAFF</b>
<b>ROLE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Identify/monitor issues</li> <li>-Recommend positions</li> <li>-Keep Board informed</li> <li>-Build relationships with pols</li> <li>-When authorized, advance chamber positions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Define parameters</li> <li>-Make policy decisions</li> <li>-Schedule agenda time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Bring issues to committee attention</li> <li>-Communicate w/members, media, govt.</li> <li>-Research issues</li> <li>-Provide required office support</li> </ul>
<b>RULES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Don't commit chamber w/out Board approval</li> <li>-Respect Board's prerogative</li> <li>-Consider all sides</li> <li>-Discussions confidential</li> <li>-Remain non-partisan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Encourage involvement of Chamber in govt. &amp; community issues</li> <li>-Respect committee input</li> <li>-Consider all sides</li> <li>-Discussions confidential</li> <li>-Remain non-partisan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Don't commit Chamber w/out Board approval</li> <li>-Minimize surprises</li> <li>-Consider all sides</li> <li>-Discussions confidential</li> <li>-Remain non-partisan</li> </ul>
<b>ONGOING ISSUES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Pro-active recommended policy positions on anticipated future issues</li> <li>-Furnish info to Board in advance of meetings</li> <li>-Present written proposals &amp; recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Read &amp; consider info supplied in advance of meetings</li> <li>-Don't debate to death</li> <li>-Introduce pro-active issues for consideration by Board &amp; Committee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Research</li> <li>-Preparation of written materials for distribution to members</li> <li>-Provide perspective from other groups &amp; about possible consequences</li> </ul>
<b>TIME-SENSITIVE ISSUES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Recognize urgent situations</li> <li>-If necessary to act w/out full Board approval, follow agreed upon steps approved by Board</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Be prepared to act quickly</li> <li>-Establish &amp; accept specific approval process (short of board meeting) to be used by committee</li> <li>-Authorize committee to act on its own under narrow conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Alert committee as soon as possible on urgent issues</li> <li>-Gather pertinent info &amp; opinions needed by committee</li> <li>-Identify options</li> </ul>

*Courtesy of Columbia County (NY) Chamber of Commerce*

If you are forming or re-making your government affairs committee or activist circle, this assignment could be the first thing they are given to do. After you or the committee creates a draft, run it by the board at the next meeting. Get them to sign off on the definitions and boundaries. You can work on changing the limits later if different entities want or need more autonomy.

Too many government relations committees end up serving as mere research arms for the board of directors, studying issues and sending up recommendations to the board, only to see their effort go to waste when the board routinely chooses to table or punt on the issues. This is discouraging to the participants and threatening to the board.

By the same token, many boards of directors and staffs find themselves picking up the pieces left by renegade government relations committees that shoot from the hip and damage relationships with members and government officials. Chamber executives find themselves spending time that should be

used for effective government relations on umpiring intra-organizational boxing matches.

In the end, you and the board will be hashing out these limits as they apply to the work of your committees, your inner circle of activists and the staff. Before you come to closure, however, you must obtain some input from all of your customer bases. The key customer is the potential member of your government affairs council or activist circle. Be sure to either bring such a person (non-director) in on the definitions process early, or to at least run your draft guidelines by her to find out whether she has any interest in serving in the capacities you are describing for her.

There are five entities requiring parameters or envelopes:

1. The membership at large
2. Your government affairs committee, council or task force
3. An activist circle of members who work with you directly on issues (More about this group throughout this guide)
4. The Board of Directors
5. You, as executive, and your staff as an extension of you

So, who does what and what are the limits on each group? The following may not work in your shop, but they should at least be considered:

Members: The membership at large, or at least the portion of the membership you can motivate to act, can best be used as a grassroots “weapon” when needed. In addition, individual members should be encouraged to bring public policy concerns to the attention of the staff. They deserve respect and answers when they do so. Members should be informed of all positions and actions being taken by the staff, committee and board. If you feel uncomfortable telling them about it, you probably shouldn’t be doing it!

Committee/Council: This standing or short-term committee of volunteers, usually referred to as the government relations committee, public affairs council, or some similar title, is drawn from within the membership and is charged with examining and studying problems and issues. It drafts recommended positions for eventual approval by the board of directors, but is not responsible for stating chamber policy. The committee also helps the staff draw up broad strategies. Once the board has approved an issue and position, this committee can recommend and undertake action steps to achieve desired policy changes. It is responsible for insuring that public policy activities remain a priority for the organization and that members of the committee do what they can to take part in such activities. This group only interacts directly with elected officials as arranged for by staff.

*Note: A standing committee of this type may not survive under your re-engineered public affairs program.*

Activist Circle: Sometimes, this group is the same as the committee or council above, but ideally, it operates on a slightly different level. For some organizations, the existence of an inner circle may never actually be acknowledged, but it probably exists. The parameters of this group are hard to define, but their work is critical. Much more about this group will be described throughout this guide. When it comes to policy initiatives, the activist circle is a working extension of the chamber executive.

Chief Executive: The executive’s envelope should include the role of spokesperson on any position previously agreed to by the board. The executive should not make policy, but should be a forceful advocate within the board and the committee for the issues she or he believes are crucial to the membership. The executive’s responsibility also includes bringing issues to the board and the committee from the membership and from outside sources, such as the state chamber, U.S. Chamber, trade associations and government itself. The executive is also, obviously, the primary “doer” in terms of

organizing tactics and actions aimed at forwarding your positions. The executive arranges for the research to allow the board and committee to make sensible decisions and interacts directly with elected and appointed officials.

Board of Directors: The Board, like the membership, should recommend issues for consideration by the government relations committee. Board members approve the overall legislative/regulatory program for the year, as well as additions and modifications to that agenda on an ongoing basis. They empower the staff and committee to work toward the goals expressed in that agenda. They speak for the organization, when needed to help achieve the goals. They should also establish processes for rapid approval of action plans and policy positions.

As noted previously, the important thing is not to adopt any outsider's view of what each entity is supposed to do, or of what the relationship should be between these entities. The critical step is to draw up a guide that will work in your organization. How can you recruit someone to serve on a local government or legislative committee, when the role of your committee is unclear? Will they be talking directly with the county executive? If so, they need to know that *before* they agree to serve. How can the board feel comfortable giving the chamber president license to speak out on issues, when they aren't sure how the positions were arrived at? Chances are, even if you and your organization have been involved in this kind of work for years, you do not have a chart or guide to define these roles. Tradition and history may make the working relationships comfortable, but the parameters still need to be formalized. If they are, your organization will operate more effectively and harmoniously.

Parameters dealing with the chamber's policy agenda and roster of issues also need to be established and agreed upon. More about this in the next chapter.

### ***The need for speed***

Sometimes, you need to act now! It would be nice if the only issues we had to worry about were the ones that we had prepared for in advance. With that luxury, we would always be able to craft policy statements through an organized committee structure and process. We would circulate draft position papers or policy statements for advanced editing by anybody and everybody with a stake in the issue. Unfortunately, modern American government systems don't work like that. A week can be a long time in politics . . . or it can be over in a blink.

The reality of the American political scene, especially at the state and local levels, involves surprises, sudden changes of heart by elected representatives and opportunities materializing out of nowhere. You sometimes need the capacity to act quickly, without going through normal board procedures or team meetings. This is no big surprise, but how many organizations are prepared to deal with these unanticipated (yet expected) emergencies in a systematic way?

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**“Let's talk about that at the next meeting” is not a process.**

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While every important policy situation can't be planned for, it *is* possible to anticipate and expect that important emergency action on public policy initiatives will face your organization every year. Count on it. You need to set up a process, short of a full board meeting, for approval of short-notice lobbying tactics. There should be steps you follow each time, regardless of the nature of the crisis or opportunity.

When J.P. Moery of the U.S. Chamber calls and says he needs a letter from the chamber in support of a specific striker replacement bill, which is moving through a conference committee, you're not doing him, your members, or your mission any justice by responding that you don't have any way to get a position in

a timely fashion. It would be perfectly fine to end up telling J.P. that the chamber doesn't have a position, but your organization should have a method in place to confirm and express a formal position in a hurry.

For maximum efficiency, the process you set up would involve just you. You would go through a checklist of simple steps you have pre-arranged with the board. And, in this fantasy world, if you follow the prescribed steps and come up with a chamber position, the board would bless you retroactively, after you write the memo. Yeah, right.

Some chambers have handled the need for speed by establishing a process that involves a small subcommittee of three people, usually members of the board. We'll call this group the "speed committee."

When a situation arises that calls for rapid response, the chamber executive or staff person assigned to government affairs, calls the "speed committee" to get approval to move on a policy or strategy. Not only is this group authorized to approve a request to take action on an issue, it is, more importantly, also the group that decides whether an issue must go before the board. A good system might be to require that the opinion of the "speed committee" be unanimous, and that at least two of the three people on this committee be reached in person - not answering machines or email, but actual contact.

While tempered by a committee or process, the chief executive must eventually be empowered to write and state the positions on predetermined issues when rapid response is required. There is just no other way to react quickly. *The chamber executive must be authorized to express the opinion of the organization on time-sensitive issues.* Circulating endless drafts of proposed language just won't work when a zoning board or full legislature vote is looming. If you must engage in clearing your position with some members of the board, design the "run-it-by" process to be as short as possible, requiring approval by a predetermined subgroup, not by consensus of the whole organization.

### ***Independent action with reduced risk***

Remember, you can craft position statements on rush issues as a series of principles, just like you do with your main program. So, if it's too hard or risky to produce a specific statement in a hurry, produce one that stops short of controversial specificity.

For example, the U.S. Chamber's request for a position on the fast-moving striker replacement bill comes in on your voicemail. If it's to be of any value at all, a letter or call to your Congressional Representative is needed right away. Your board and government affairs committee has never examined the issue, much less this bill, but the need being expressed from Washington is real and you know of at least two major manufacturers in your region who are strongly supportive of the U.S. Chamber's position. While it would be nice to support that position completely and enthusiastically, you know it is too risky to do so without a period of debate and consideration. You can still help the cause . . . in a hurry!

Write a personal letter to your Senate or House representatives that makes them aware of your chamber's concern about this issue, without embracing the U.S. Chamber's stand completely. This step is only meant to give pause to the representatives so that they at least consider the other sides, and possibly reach out to you, before they vote. Your letter might look like this:

*Dear Congresswoman Smith.*

*We understand that your committee is considering passage of legislation that would guarantee that strikers might return to their jobs following*

*strikes of any length. We understand the strong sentiment within the labor community for such legislation, but our membership includes many companies that would be adversely affected by this legislation. We urge you not to proceed without a full discussion of the economic impact of this measure on employers in our community.*

*Thank you for your consideration. We would welcome the opportunity to organize a round table discussion of the issue here in the district if you would like to gain additional input from key constituent groups.*

*Sincerely,*

***Buzz Aldren  
President***

This is just an example of an independent step you could take if you need to act in a hurry on your own, without board, or much of anybody's, approval. J.P. needs the letter now! By writing a letter like the one above, you've done something - not as much as the chamber, or even you, might have liked to do, but something.

### ***Speed on the main track***

Once again, independent action and short-term approval processes are not the norm, nor should they be used in lieu of a structured program for putting together a policy agenda. The normal course of events will have you formulate an agenda or list of issues that the chamber knows it is going to be facing in the months ahead. You will have pre-established positions on those priorities. Details may change, but the overall agenda and opinions of the organization should not. This should leave you free to act on those pre-established issues when an opportunity or necessity arises.

One of the key envelopes to define between you and your board of directors involves the degree of independence the executive may exercise in addressing (on a short-notice basis) the already-agreed-upon positions in the main legislative agenda. Get yourself as much freedom as you and the board can handle in this regard. Insist that someone actually put it in the minutes, or in the chamber roster of policies, authorizing you to act - issuing public comments and written opinions on positions that have already been agreed to by the organization.

In other words, if the chamber is in favor of widening Highway 403 on the west side of your county, then you must have the responsibility and freedom to tell reporters, your members or your elected officials, as often, and through as many vehicles as possible, that the chamber considers this a priority. If you have the policy, you need to be freed up to say so (free to lobby) when opportunities present themselves.

The need for speed is real. Your board and membership simply cannot ignore this reality and expect your organization to be effectively involved in public affairs. Spend the time to make it clear to them that you will be taking short-term action on issues. If they know you are going to do it, they will probably want to get involved in establishing policies in the first place.

## ***The “Activists”***

The most important volunteer component of your government relations operation is *not* the government affairs committee. That committee or task force is important, but it really comes second to the “activist circle.” This group can be as small as five people. It can be composed of board members or not, government affairs committee members or not. You can recruit top management or influential staff people at companies. The only real criteria are that these individuals be from the private sector and that they be committed to working with you to make your chamber a player in the policy arena.

### **What are they signing up for? The activist group . . .**

- Serves as a sounding board for policy positions
- Starts the branches for your member-to-member communications (email groups, fax trees, phone banks, etc.)
- Helps you write and re-write your public policy agenda
- Appears in public when appropriate
- Interviews candidates for public office (or helps write the questions) if you engage in this activity
- Makes your case to your board for positions and action
- Writes letters on issues the chamber is espousing
- Recruits members of the larger government affairs committee
- Tries to establish personal relationships with elected officials at each level of government
- Performs other leadership functions

There are several reasons why you are only looking for 3-5 people. First, because the commitment is a serious one that involves some real work. Because you cannot do the job without this inner circle, they must be of a certain caliber of individual (not in terms of political clout, but in terms of reliability and reputation).

Not just anybody will do. It’s never too tough to get joiners, but that’s not what this activist group is about. You must recruit the people who are most eager and concerned. They are the people who push you to do more in this area. They are the drivers of policy for the organization. They are the leaders.

“Leaders give us a sense not of who they are, but of who we are.”<sup>3</sup> That is especially true with your activist public affairs group. They will truly define what the organization is, in terms of policy affecting the chamber and its member employers.

In terms of the role and structure for your activist circle, the idea is to create an inner circle of elite power; a gang of five who can shape and direct the policy and activities of the organization. Not only is the

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<sup>3</sup> Si Kahn, *Organizing*, p. 21.

number of participants small . . . so is the original scope of activity for the circle. This group should focus, at first, on just one or two issues considered vital to the organization.

While this gang starts out small and somewhat elite, there is no reason to make it exclusive. Rather, it should be inclusive. The only acceptable criteria for approving or disapproving a member for inclusion in this activist group are their willingness to be *active*.

You need to set up programs with and for just them. Invite a key legislative staff person, or a representative of your state chamber to meet with just them and help them craft positions or strategies. Or, you can take them on a field trip to undertake a hands-on budgeting exercise with the city comptroller. Help them structure a roundtable discussion program on the local television station. One way or the other, set up real, substantive programs designed just for your five activists.

In order to attract good people and keep them involved, this group must have clout *and* formal status at the board table. The board of directors should understand that this group helps to formulate positions and strategies, right along with the board itself. They should be encouraged to take an ex-officio role on any political or issue-specific task forces of the board.

This activist circle should grow only as new members are recruited by the initial team. You can certainly make recommendations to this group about people you think would be good additions, but let them decide who they want in. "...it's so important that leaders take as their first responsibility the development of other leaders."<sup>4</sup>

### ***Does this group replace the government relations committee?***

The relationship between your government affairs committee and the activist circle should be friendly and cooperative. The activists are, by definition, willing to do more than the committee people do. All of the members, boards and committees should be working together for the common good of the organization and the community. The activist group is just working a little harder and in more ways. Because of that extra effort, they have greater responsibility and a little touch of exclusivity. They earn it.

The board hassles out the agenda and sets the policy direction for the organization. Your activist circle takes responsibility for helping you move that agenda. They can't replace the work and participation of the board of directors, government affairs committee and membership. There's plenty of work for everyone and the roles can, and should, blur frequently.

### ***GR Committees***

*Standing committees tend to stand, i.e. stand around., stand still... stand for nothing... stand to lose...*

Rather than a standing government relations committee, you might want to consider establishing several smaller task forces or action groups. These should be organized around issue areas or specific policy decisions faced by the community. They should also have finite time frames. For instance, you might have a task force on local property taxes or one on energy. One chamber never allows a committee of this type to exist formally for more than one year. At the end of that year, either their work is done, or they re-commission themselves with a slightly different mission.

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<sup>4</sup> Si Kahn, "Organizing," p. 24.

By having issue-related task forces, you attract more people to the process. People in the energy business who would have no trouble skipping *all* of the meetings of the government affairs committee would never miss a single session of the *Energy Cost Reduction Task Force*. Furthermore, the clout and credibility of this task force will be higher with your board. And, the mere formation of the task force in a public way is lobbying.

### ***Filling the ranks***

In order to have a successful public affairs program, it is necessary to have individuals within the organization who are committed and active. Motivating these volunteers to become active in any of a myriad of projects, committees and subgroups related to government relations is a major challenge for every association and chamber in the country. “The members of almost every group think that they are the most difficult people to organize... What’s fascinating is that almost any group tends to see itself as divided and other groups as unified.”<sup>5</sup>

The biggest single hurdle you must overcome in attempting to recruit an activist for your inner circle, or a participant for a task force, is the same objection we each give ourselves when asked to take on a new challenge or task. We can all recite the quote: “I’d really like to, but I don’t have the time.” Earlier, we talked about what this remark really means. (Reminder: It means you haven’t adequately communicated the importance of the work.)

For effective recruiting, you need to quantify things clearly for people, so volunteers don’t think they’re swallowing a whole ham in one gulp. Joel Blackwell, in his presentations and audiotapes about grassroots motivation, suggests that we quantify the requirements in terms of minutes or hours per month. Is it worth 45 minutes per month, plus two one-hour meetings each year? Figure out what the organization requires of these folks and then ask the recruit if they will commit to just that. Offer to put the limits in writing if you need to. Give them a strong sense that their commitment is finite and manageable.

One important caveat: When you tell them it will only be an hour a month, you must mean it!

### ***Nobody ever asked me***

When members of organizations of every size and ilk are surveyed about why they don’t get involved in public affairs, the Number One reason consistently given is: “Nobody asked me.”<sup>6</sup> Keep one thing in mind - A member may have read your appeal for involvement and volunteers in the newsletter five or six times and still think that nobody ever asked them to take part. Personal involvement in the public policy process - which is what you are asking for - requires a personal, face-to-face (usually peer-to-peer) invitation. As the old union bosses used to say, “A factory with two thousand workers is still organized one worker at a time.”<sup>7</sup>

When making this one-on-one appeal for participation in any of your policy related teams, whether the activist circle or a task force, tell the recruit the truth - tell her that the organization will simply be less effective unless this team or committee is working. Your organization can still have some impact without strong volunteer support, but it won’t be what it could be. “When recruiting people, don’t be afraid to appeal to their self-interest . . . people do the most selfless things out of self-interest. Self interest. . . together with values, vision and relationships, underpin most organizational involvement. . .”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Si Kahn, “Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Organizing,” p.15

<sup>6</sup> Joel Blackwell, “Motivating Your Members For Grassroots Lobbying,” *audio presentation*.

<sup>7</sup> Si Kahn, “Organizing,” p. 110

<sup>8</sup> K. Bobo, et al, “Organizing For Social Change,” p. 80.

## CHAPTER 3

### Deciding What to Work On

#### The Agenda. What kinds of issues?

It doesn't mean anything to anybody to have the chamber always taking bland and predictable positions:

**“The chamber opposes the serving of road kill in school cafeterias.”**

**OR...**

**“The chamber thinks over-regulation is bad.”**

Sometimes, you need to be “out there.” It is certainly true that you risk members if you take strong, direct stands on issues. Many people are uncomfortable with even the slightest controversy and think of the chamber as a largely social organization. Some members might become casualties of change and those losses could be very obvious and painful. In reality, whether you recognize it or not, you are *definitely* losing members (or the opportunity for more money from existing members) by *not* taking strong stands on key issues.

You certainly shouldn't come out of the box with Scud missiles flying and the chamber thrusting its chin out as a target for political fists. You want real, substantive issues, but your exposure must be sensible and suited to the climate in which you operate.

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**You may be losing members if you take risks.  
You are definitely losing members if you don't.**

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If your public policy program is new, an important step is to encourage the board to define the public policy initiative envelope in which your chamber will operate. Just as you must decide who does what, with what authority, you must try to draw up some issue parameters as well.

For programs that have been around for a while, it's very likely that you are making unsubstantiated assumptions about the public policy comfort levels and borders within which your board and membership want to operate. Or, perhaps, you are testing issues one at a time, possibly taking up valuable board time and volunteer energy talking over issues that have no chance whatever of being part of your agenda.

To get started in this definitions process, you might want the board to sign off on a global policy statement:

“It is the intention of this chamber to take public positions on issues that affect the competitiveness of this community in relation to other communities or regions.” Or.

“It is the intention of this chamber to work for policies that lower the cost of doing business for all employers in this region.”

Such statements can become the broad parameters - the Christmas trees - on which you AND the board hang your ornaments when determining specific positions. Even better would be a whole list of policy statements, such as those below:

This chamber...

- . . . will work to improve the business climate and quality of life for Rockland County
- . . . acts in the public policy arena whenever the interests of the business community as a whole are challenged
- . . . takes a pro-active role in crafting public policies, which could assist our members and the business community as a whole
- . . . encourages its members to take an active role in grassroots lobbying and other public policy activities aimed at advancing the agenda of the business community
- . . . provides members with the information and tools they need to take an active role in promoting pro-business policies and opposing anti-business policies
- . . . will be a source for accurate and persuasive media communication to express the opinions and goals of the business community
- . . . does its part to support allied employer organizations around the state and the nation
- . . . will establish and maintain a process, which can enable timely and effective involvement in the public policy arena
- . . . can. . .
- . . . will. . .

After defining the context in which your organization will take action, you then need to come up with an even more direct “action quotient” - What is it that you and the chamber can and will do about these policies and issues? More about this in later chapters.

### ***The agenda: How big? What's in it?***

When choosing the issues on which you and your organization will expend time, sweat and money, you need to keep in mind that ". . . problems are different from issues. People need to feel strongly about a problem for it to be an issue. It must be something that enough people feel strongly about to be willing to work to change."<sup>9</sup>

Everybody's got problems, new ones every day. Your chamber can't shape its organization policies or action plans around problems. Focus on *real issues* that a significant number of members care about, not on *problems* faced by individual companies or industries. You may choose to handle many problems in the course of the casework you do for your members, but you should try to keep them from becoming a

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<sup>9</sup> Joel Blackwell, *Motivating Volunteers For Grassroots Action*, audio presentation

distraction for your overall government relations program.

How many issues or policy areas should be addressed in a chamber government relation's agenda? If you're not doing any agenda now (or if you're just doing a reactive program based on what comes across your desk from the state chamber or largest metro chamber in your region), you might want to think about establishing a ten-item agenda for the chamber: three local issues, three state issues, three federal issues and one issue related to the operations or success of chambers themselves (insurance regulations, lobbying rules, job training funding, tourism grants, etc).

If you already have an agenda in some shape or form, try to get your committee, and perhaps even your board, to give it a fresh look. If the same issue has been on your agenda for ten years, without action or movement, and only a handful of members remember why it was put there in the first place, it might be time to scratch it. You might also simply restyle your existing agenda to divide your issues into priority levels or tiers, but a fresh, blue-sky approach is usually more effective.

You will also have a number of reactive situations you may have to address in a given year. They're not part of your agenda, but they must fit into the list of principles or beliefs spelled out above. It's impossible to know what policy emergencies or opportunities will pop up, but you know they're coming.

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**You don't know what, when or how,  
but you know policy emergencies are coming.**

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The state could propose a new tax on small business, the Federal government could want to create a whole new set of overbearing Clean Air Act regulations or the city could try to close Main Street.

While you can't possibly anticipate all of these public policy wildfires, you can establish a process for dealing with them, since you know some are coming. Build a process to evaluate the threats to, or opportunities for, your members inherent in a given government proposal. Establish a means to draft a chamber position statement and pre-design tactics for alerting your members.

But let's get back to your proactive agenda. What does it look like? How do you structure it? The best legislative/public policy agendas resemble lists of principles or positions, which get progressively more specific and detailed. Think of it as a pyramid or a funnel, with each step focusing more and more on the target.

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**The level of detail is determined by your knowledge, combined  
with the organization's "point of consensus."**

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Two factors determine the level of detail in your final position: Your organizational knowledge of the issue and the point of consensus within your committee or board. If you don't know a lot about an issue, or if your members are not in agreement about how far to go with it, your stated position on that issue will be vague. If, on the other hand, everyone agrees on a solution to a problem, and you feel comfortable with your ability to defend the position, you write it up very specifically.

### **Presenting your chamber's agenda, example 1:**

Your government affairs committee (or board of directors, or activist network, or whichever body) wants the issue of local taxation to appear in your public policy agenda. The local taxation issue is a good one, but you can't just say: "Local taxes are bad . . . make them go away."

You need to define your position, which is most easily accomplished by writing up a series of principles related to the local tax issue, starting with the most general statement and moving toward more specificity.

- 5 *This chamber supports reducing local taxes*
- 4 *This chamber opposes tax reduction if it leads to reductions in vital services, but feels that all levels of government should be operating with greater efficiencies and less cost.*
- 3 *This chamber feels that property taxes are regressive and should be replaced by other forms of taxation when possible.*
- 2 *This chamber remains in opposition to the two-tiered "homestead" tax structure imposed in 1990.*
- 1 *This chamber supports the Wilson-Smalt proposal to phase out the homestead tax over the next two years.*

### **Example 2:**

The chamber wants the issue of energy cost reduction to be part of its agenda, but the politics of energy are convoluted and often contentious within your membership. Can you take a position and still keep the peace? Yes, by focusing on one aspect of the issue:

- 4 *The Chamber recognizes that energy costs in this region are significant deterrent to economic health and growth, and that several steps must be taken to lower energy costs.*
- 3 *While other policies affecting the price of energy must eventually be dealt with, the chamber believes that energy taxes are the most significant factor causing higher energy costs and urges reduction in taxes charged to utilities, which are passed along to customers.*
- 2 *The chamber has identified the gross receipts tax as the most onerous energy tax and urges the state legislature to eliminate this tax.*
- 1 *The chamber supports the Seward-Tonko bill for replacement of the GRT with an income-based tax on utility companies.*

The chamber can stop anywhere on the "countdown" toward a concrete legislative recommendation.

You can also set up branches in the same issue area. For instance, in the first example above, a chamber might have the same two starting principles, followed by a split into a new local tax branch other than homestead - something like property tax abatements for new businesses. In the second example, a chamber might open by stating the same general principle and then establish two or three branches, with strings of policy statements, to address all of the factors driving up energy costs.

Again, the chamber puts together these series of policy statements on various issues, with each successive statement more specific than the one before it. Where the organization stops along the continuum depends upon the degree of consensus and the relative comfort level for controversy in the chamber.

This style has the added advantage of being adaptable to the tides of change during legislative sessions.

At the start of a year, there might not even be a piece of legislation introduced on an issue you care about. Once a bill is presented, if you like it, you can add it to the bottom of the pyramid. If you don't approve you can draft another policy statement:

**“This chamber believes that the Newton-Chen casino bill, while laudable in many ways, unnecessarily limits the regions in which gaming will be allowed.”**

This pyramid model is just a suggestion. You may find that the legislative agenda you've been using for years works well, or you may want to model yours after the format used by your state chamber. For small chambers or groups unaccustomed to handling these kinds of issues, the main thing is to draft an agenda or program early (for most state and county agendas, you should do your drafting in November) if you don't already have one. Ask your customers, especially your government relations committee, board of directors and government officials (yes, they're customers too), if they like and understand the style you're using.

### ***Drafting the agenda***

Who drafts the agenda or legislative program? For the most part, the initial draft of the program should be put together by the staff of the organization. Volunteers are simply not in a position to put together a first draft of the legislative agenda. If constructed by volunteers, the document will tend to be tilted toward the people with the most time or interest, it will not fit the format you have chosen and, most importantly, it probably won't get done on time.

If you already have a functioning government relations committee or activist network, you should have a pretty good idea of the top priorities, but review them twice a year to reaffirm that they are still priorities. If you're starting from scratch, just convene a focus group for an hour and half and, using a flip chart, get a rough idea of what everyone is thinking about. Then lock yourself up for a day and hash out a first draft.

### ***Picking the Issues***

As an organization, it can be useful to establish a checklist for choosing good issues for your organization to take on. This will be customized to your individual needs, but the following sample might help. If you can say “yes” to many of these items, you probably should have this issue in your public policy agenda:

#### **Issue Choices Checklist**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Can we define a “win” on this issue? (See below.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Will the help of our organization make a real difference to the outcome?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Does the issue affect a large number of our members in a significant way?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Is working on this issue likely to help build the organization?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Do people feel strongly about the issue?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Will it be possible for us to adequately learn the technical aspects of this issue?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Is this the kind of issue that will unite our members? Can we even get consensus?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Does the issue fit into our larger mission?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Does the political gain exceed the political pain of getting involved?
- \_\_\_\_\_ What are the motives of the parties that brought this issue to our attention?

\_\_\_\_\_ Are our allies and neighbors likely to take on this issue?

\_\_\_\_\_ Is this issue going to be dealt with during the next twelve months, whether we are in the fight or not?

\_\_\_\_\_ Do we need to fight this fight to establish or maintain our credibility with members and/or policy makers'?

\_\_\_\_\_ Your own criteria: \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Defining victory***

How you define “victory” is one factor you should definitely consider before fighting a new issue. For neighborhood citizens groups, as an example, an objective might be a new four-way traffic signal at a given intersection. Going into that fight, the organization would want to get some level of consensus on whether a four-way or two-way stop sign arrangement, or some other compromise, would be better than nothing. Eventually, you can count on the opposition to offer a compromise, so you’ll need to anticipate the walk-away point for your members.

Another example comes from one state chamber’s workers’ compensation reform campaign. Having been burned enough times with bad compromises and broken deals in the legislature, the state group and its allied local chambers simply established a minimum percentage decrease in premium rates that would be acceptable to the group. This not only made things easier for the chief executive when it came to getting pushed at the negotiating table, but also forced the legislature to stop flirting with the edges of reform.

In his grassroots-organizing book, Si Kahn advises that it’s much more effective to define what a victory would be at the time you decide to take on an issue. He suggests you determine what a “partial victory” and a “complete victory” would be.

In addition, you’ll want to discuss an acceptable time-line for change, since those trying to reach compromise on difficult Issues frequently offer phase-ins and phase-outs.

### ***Controversy and conflict***

Hard to believe, right? An organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of business has trouble agreeing on a policy or strategy? Impossible!

Of course, you know better. You know that you can gather three presidents from three almost identically sized banks in the same community, ask each of them their opinion on a legislative matter, and get three different answers. This is the challenge we all face working with heterogeneous employer groups. One chamber executive described the problem of reaching consensus in his organization as: “Trying to herd blind ants.”

But remember, controversy and conflict are not the same thing:

**Controversy:** An issue is *hot*. Some politicians, the media, your neighbors and even some business people might get visibly angry over a position you and a majority of your members want to take.

**Conflict:** Different industries (or individuals) within your membership feel differently, and strongly, about a given topic.

One metro chamber in Tennessee states openly, with buy-in from the board of directors. that if they're not upsetting a few members when they take a stand, they're not taking a very strong stand. To enter the public affairs realm is to assume a few risks, but it's worth it. Consider the following rules for minimizing these risks when creating or updating your public policy agenda:

1. When it's necessary to choose, fall on the side of private sector employers in general, rather than on the side of any one industry. In other words, if the policy is good for business *in general*, it wins. Make sure your larger blocks of members - health care, retail, banking - know this "general good" rule.
2. If, because of politics or member disagreement, you can't take a strong position, it's better to be vague, than to pretend there isn't any issue. If an issue affecting the economy or specific groups of businesses is hot, and the chamber appears to be hiding from it, you will eventually lose credibility with the community and your own membership.
3. Issues that pit one region or portion of your territory against another should be off limits for your organization. This is one case where the greater good rule doesn't hold. Once again, make sure your members know up front that you're going to avoid these types of conflicts in most circumstances.
4. The 400-pound gorilla can't win every time. If the chamber's government affairs agenda and issues are always shaped by the biggest companies, your credibility and effectiveness will be hampered. The best big companies don't try to control agendas, but if your larger dues payers always try to run the show, do some pre-game counseling at the highest levels of that company.
5. When issues are very controversial, some chambers produce position statements with minority positions. Avoid this when possible, but if you believe the organization can't act without the minority opinion somewhere in the opinion paper, it's better than nothing.
6. Even when consensus is impossible, a chamber should not shy away from being the forum for *point / counter-point discussions*. The one thing members, or groups of members, should not ask of you is that you pretend an issue doesn't exist.

### ***Ugly ornaments on beautiful trees***

One of the most difficult situations we can face occurs when a policy proposal at the state or federal level would be positive for business in general, yet negative for the economy of your region, at least in the short term. Taking a positive position on something like MFN trade status for China might seem easy for most businesses, because it was generally seen as pro-business. If, however, your region's primary employer would be negatively affected by predatory textile imports, the chamber could be hung in effigy (by your own members) for supporting it.

Support, in general, for reduced government spending and taxes is an all-American, business-friendly kind of position. But if one of the results is the closure of a psychiatric center in your community, it can be tough to be out front on the budget issue, no matter how much your local chamber supports the state chamber's general efforts to control government spending.

There is no simple rule for handling these tough issues, except to remember that you don't lobby for everybody. Advocates who represent the podiatrists or the highway striping association can make an economic development argument for their government contracts. Does that mean you should lobby for the foot doctors?

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**You don't lobby for everybody!**

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It's really quite amazing that non-profits, schools and local governments will think nothing of demanding that the chamber take a stand and lobby in support of XYZ program, while at the same time offering no assistance in lobbying on business climate issues. In fact, many times, these same people lobby directly against proposals that would help the economy grow. Remember that lobbying time and energy, for you and your members, are limited. They are precious resources. Put those efforts to use on your issues first. And, try to get something in return from the other guys if you help them with issues that are only on the fringes of your chamber's mission.

There is one other problem chambers often face in dealing with issues and legislative proposals - sometimes, these bills, regulations or ideas are neither all good, nor all bad. Budgets are a great example. Some legislator or county executive is always slipping stinkers into otherwise acceptable (and even laudable) budget documents. The devil, as always, is in the details and sometimes you need to do battle with the devil.

Here's a good and common example:

In this era of new federalism, every branch of government is trying to pass responsibility and funding down to the next lower jurisdiction - federal to state, state to county, county to local. Sometimes, those proposing these changes promise new freedom to those below in the food chain. Mandate relief packages are proposed, most of which must be applauded by the business community. They make sense and are absolutely necessary to reduce government costs. But lately, these packages have also included new authority for state, county and local governments to tax - authority that, in most cases, they've never had before. As you can imagine, lower levels of government are salivating over these new opportunities to tax business, without higher approval. How do you, as an organization, hug mandate relief while attacking this new license to tax'?

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**Sometimes, bills are neither all good, nor all bad.**

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*Just do it.* The fact that you like, in principle, the state or Federal budget cutting, does not mean you like every part of it. Do your best to incorporate your positive overall message and your negative response to a specific component in the same communication to government officials. Demand that the grossly unfair and poorly thought-out clause in S.4459 be amended, while reinforcing your support for the primary intent of the bill.

***Practice makes perfect***

On controversial issues, many chambers have a great deal of trouble taking positions and openly lobbying on one side or the other. The best and only way to improve your chamber's ability to be out there on this kind of policy is to practice - to take on one or two such issues with the express purpose of finding out how and how well you handle them. For your first few attempts as an organization, make sure that, even if the position you take is controversial, the chamber's position is absolutely *dead on* its mission (without ambiguity). It would not be wise, for instance, to choose as one of your first controversial issues to support or oppose placing a new Wal-Mart in your community. Either side of that issue can easily make the case that your support is justified according to a chamber mission that includes economic growth.

On the other hand, a proposition to shift the local property tax burden off residential buildings and onto business property - while controversial and divisive for the community - should be fairly easy for your

## Making Your Chamber Make a Difference

chamber to oppose - loudly and often. This position is clearly in tune with your mission, without ambiguity, even if it is controversial.

Picking issues and drafting agendas is really the cornerstone of your advocacy work because for chambers, the mere statement of your position on a given issue is a powerful lobbying statement. Lawmakers know that you have the strength of hundreds of thousands of influential people behind every position you take. Just taking the position sends a loud message from the chamber to elected officials.

## CHAPTER 4

# The Learning Curve

### What the heck are they talking about?

Acquisition of knowledge on issues is one of your toughest challenges. The opportunities for falling flat on your face due to insufficient understanding seem endless. You don't want to look like a jerk. You don't want your members misinformed. And, you sometimes may feel that you don't have the skills to be an effective advocate or organizer. It is very easy to spend much of your time worrying about what you don't know.

#### ***Rule One: You will never know enough***

In his books, *Information Anxiety* and *Information Anxiety II*, Richard Wurman talks about the gap between what we know and what we think we should know. He contends that this gap creates "information anxiety" in all of us. This anxiety may never be more evident than in dealing with complex public policy issues. Wurman's cure for this syndrome is to narrow the scope of our information intake and to learn things as we need them. Applying his theories could help you with your public policy learning curve and ease your information anxiety.

Study just enough about an issue (through the sources and techniques discussed later in this chapter) to enable you to learn more through conversation. Then go back for more knowledge as you become aware of the many nuances of the issue, the players involved and the real impact on your members. Do not feel that you must know what the specialists know before you can get involved in an issue. If you wait for that day, you will be waiting a lifetime. Try to keep in mind that while you may not be a specialist in every (or any) issue area, neither are the people you are trying to influence!

"Generalists are not doomed to extinction ... a U.S. senator is not a doctor, but needs a thoughtful position on health care, and is not an accountant, but won't get reelected without sensible views on tax policy."<sup>10</sup>

#### ***Rule Two - Become an expert in the problem first***

It's not your job to make laws or regulations. It's *their jobs*. Just as *you* will never know as much about an issue as the congressional staffer, *they* will never know nearly as much as you know about the pain a specific policy is causing, or the economic gain to be achieved through positive policy change. You don't have to be as smug as the policy wonks, but don't feel inferior either! You know a great deal. It sometimes helps to imagine that it is they (as ivory tower or beltway shut-ins) who are out of touch and it's your job to give them the benefit of your wisdom.

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***It's not your job to make laws . . . it's their job.***

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Before you study the solutions, study the problems faced, or opportunities missed, by errant or slow government.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Dilenschneider, *On Power*, p.17.

## ***Finding the springs of knowledge***

Still, you need to know something about proposed legislative and regulatory solutions, the politics surrounding the issues and their impact on your members. Where do you find this information?

De-dumbing on issues is *not* an overwhelming task. There are a few secrets. The first is to address the issues one at a time. Thinking that you must know all the issues contained in the state chamber's legislative agenda before you can effectively lobby a state legislator is demoralizing. Instead of trying to swallow the whole hippo, set aside some time to learn about one issue and don't get into the next one until you have a basic understanding of the first. Focus on workers' comp until you know enough about it to discuss it with an "average citizen" - then move on to education funding or the next most important issue on your legislative agenda. The learning process will become more manageable, less intimidating and more likely to be attempted in the first place.

## ***Sources of information***

You have four immediate and direct sources of information available to you as a chamber executive: The US Chamber, the state chamber, trade associations and individual professionals in any given field who happen to live in your community. There are also indirect links to a wealth of knowledge from your peers through ACCE's Government Relations Special Interest Group (SIG). Use them all. Use them up!

There are many ways to accumulate sufficient information to work on an issue and be a resource for your members.

The Internet provides the greatest ready supply of quick access and short reads on virtually any topic. With every special interest group having its own website, all you have to do is go surfing some night when you can't sleep. Many of the pieces of literature selected for inclusion on websites are intentionally short and digested. This makes them ideal for your purposes. If you want more information, just keep searching for more detailed articles.

Reading legislation or proposed regulation can be a good sleep agent, but not of great use otherwise. A ten-minute conversation with a sponsor or champion of a particular policy is worth more than an hour trying to decipher the legal-eze in a tax bill.

Few of us have the time it would take to read the full-length books and white papers devoted to any given issue. Again, a call to the researcher can cut through most the prose and provide adequate understanding to move forward.

Trade associations are a wealth of information about almost any industry-specific issue. Association presidents love to talk about their public policy concerns, and love even more the chance to try to recruit the head of an employer group like a chamber into the camp of the true believers. Call them up and chat about the issue. Admit to your lack of sophistication about the issue and they'll act like your mentor. You'll usually get a good oral presentation, followed by a packet of goodies in the mail.

Your membership and your community are full of people who know their industry and the issues they face well. Take a local CPA out to lunch in the fall (in the spring they're busy doing tax returns) and talk to them about possible tax policy changes. If an insurance issue is on your plate, call a broker or company representative to get a briefing on the topic. Landfill problems with the county legislature? Look through your membership, locate a gregarious engineer, and buy him lunch. Let these members of your community and membership be your faculty. Don't be bashful about seeming untrained in their discipline.

It is flattering to be tapped to serve as a tutor. Give them a call.

Don't rule out the information that might be presented by people you consider on the "other side" of an issue. You can learn a great deal from the information being disseminated by those who might oppose you in a public policy fight. Asking the smart growth advocate about the kinds of development they like and hate will give you a better understanding of the issue than reading a few studies.

### ***Personal seminars***

One chamber executive is especially skilled at finding ways to learn about issues without hours of classroom work or volumes of reading. She creates a mini-forum, just for her. To do this, she makes calls to three or four people who she knows have an interest in - and understanding of - an issue; say electric energy policy. She invites a utility representative, a controller for a company that pays a lot of money for power and some government agency regulator-type to come to her office for a meeting at 11:00 am. She advises her guests of the invitation list and tells them that the meeting is to discuss energy policy and what the chamber's formal position should be on the next phase of deregulation (even though she may have no intention of actually coming up with a formal position at the end of this meeting). According to this chamber president, every person invited has always said "yes" and shown up at the appointed time. She adds, "They're all afraid that somebody else's point of view will poison the chamber's position."

All this executive does before the meeting is to read enough about the topic to formulate about three or four leading questions (used only if she needs them, which she insists is unusual). She convenes the meeting with a simple statement and question - "So why are energy costs so high and what in the heck can we do about it?" Usually, that's all she has to say and the hour is totally taken up with give and take between the parties, with the exec taking notes. When the 60-90 minute meeting is over, the guests are all invited to lunch (good member relations, anyway) to continue the discussion. Once again, all of the guests take part in the lunch, out of fear that the other parties will be talking about them.

Try this and you'll have an instant, personal seminar!

You are a generalist, by definition and design. Your members don't want an expert in health care policy or landfill technology running their chamber. They want you. They want someone who isn't afraid to admit what they don't know, but who is also willing to take the time to find out about their problems. They want you to understand them and help them express those concerns to government leaders. Become an expert in the *problem* and learn just enough about the possible solutions to allow you to discuss the issue intelligently with a lay person (like your state senator!).

## CHAPTER 5

# Lobbying Basics

### You must lobby, but are you a lobbyist?

“Being a lobbyist has long been synonymous in the minds of many Americans with being a glorified pimp.”<sup>11</sup>

This may be a bit strong, but no new young activist on Capitol Hill or in the State House calls home excitedly to tell his mother he just got a job as a lobbyist. The extent to which people will go in creating euphemisms for the job can be downright humorous: *Legislative Analyst, Policy Manager~ Public Affairs Consultant, Director of Government Relations, Vice President for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs* and, everybody’s new favorite, *Advocate*. Anything but *Lobbyist*.

In your position as an executive of a chamber of commerce, you are going to have to do some lobbying. But, even if you end up on a lobbying commission register, you are unlikely to be a card-carrying lobbyist. You will probably never fall into the category with the hired guns who contract to advocate any group willing to pay. You won’t be welcomed as one of the boys at the watering holes around the state capitol. And, you won’t know all of the people who know all the people - the quality that really differentiates someone who lobbies from a lobbyist.

Your stock-in-trade is prosperity. You thrive on the positive, while professional lobbyists crave the negative. You want to win in a hurry and move your community forward, while many full-time lobbyists seem to be just as happy if a bad situation takes years to rectify in the legislature. This distinction is important, not only for your self-esteem, but also for your image in the eyes of the people you are trying to influence.

Lobbying is not an event. It is not any one act of persuasion and conversion. Rather, lobbying is a series of actions and processes aimed at directing the decision making of policy makers at all levels. If you feel that you don’t even know how to lobby, it is probably because you are misdefining it. Don’t worry about what you have convinced yourself you don’t know. Do what you know!

You know about organizing, solving problems, relationship building, marketing, communications and sales. With those skills, you will be able to lobby successfully, even if you are not a lobbyist.

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**Lobbying is not an event, it is a series of processes.**

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**You** may not know very much about lobbying, but you know a good deal about establishing relationships and selling yourself, or you wouldn’t be in the chamber business. So, do what you know how to do. In this relationship-building arena, it’s important to involve your members in the process, as well as yourself. You and your members need to establish relationships with the people to whom you are eventually going to try to sell an idea. This is not about becoming best friends and vacationing together. It is about building understanding and respect to foster positive interaction as professionals. Develop relationships with the people being lobbied and the lobbying itself will be less intimidating and more rewarding.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Birnbaum, “The Lobbyists,” p. 7

Step One in relationship building is to find out who they are. As a Washington lobbyist for the real estate industry once remarked: “This government, I’m becoming more and more convinced, is driven by human beings, not laws or institutions.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***So, who are these human beings?***

#### **A few key questions:**

- Where did they come from?
- What do they care about?
- If fairly new, why did they run (offer to serve)?
- Who gives them money?
- What committees do they serve on? (And do they like them?)
- To whom do they answer? Party people? Legislative leadership?
- With whom are they close in your membership?

Find out the answers to some or all of these simple questions before you even attempt to talk to them. If possible, get to meet with the policy maker in non-business settings to find out who they really are. These meetings might be lunches, golf outings, traveling together to a function, whatever. In Jeffrey Birnbaum’s book, *The Lobbyists*, he quotes Samuel Ward, the first “King of the Lobby” in Washington some 125 years ago, as saying: “At good dinners, people do not talk shop, but they give people the right, perhaps, to ask a gentleman a civil question and get a civil answer.

After you’ve found out something about the mayor or legislator, do a little digging to find out about his or her staffs. Get to know the top staff people and find out how they got their jobs.

- Is the job basically a patronage position (granted by whom)?
- Do they have special skills?
- What does their boss have them doing?

Finally, establish a personal or phone relationship with the elected official’s reception people or assistants. Just as in sales, relationships with the people who schedule, screen calls and open the mail can be critical.

This assignment goes beyond the realm of elected officials. One chamber holds a series of small meetings each year between a select group of members and the heads of the city’s main service-providing agencies - parks, streets, waste, police, fire, health, transit, etc. These sessions are valuable for both sides. The public sector people are able to explain why things may not always run as smoothly as business people would like, while the chamber and participating employers are provided with a face and phone number to replace the seemingly faceless bureaucracy usually associated with these agencies, while at the same time making their cases to the public sector representatives.

### ***What are you giving them?***

This relationship sales business works because it’s a two-way street. You’re asking for value, but you’re also supposed to *give* some value. You can provide research that they may not have the time or staff to obtain. You could provide opportunities for exposure and give them credit for everything good that happens in the community. You can (most importantly) play matchmaker for them.

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<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Birnbaum, “The Lobbyists,” p. 25.

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**What the elected official wants from you gives you power.**

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Help them meet the people who they need to meet - not people who are looking for favors, but people who might provide moral, and/or financial, support to the elected official. They need friends, just like people in business. They need names to drop, important people to invite to functions and photo opportunities, just like people in business. For a legislator, one of their biggest information gaps concerns knowledge of how proposed legislation could affect their own district. Fill that gap!

You don't have to do any of this, but if your idea of a relationship is: "Show me you're a good legislator by giving me what I want. . . "you will probably be disappointed with your sales figures.

If the first time a mayor or county executive sees you is when you come in to lobby on a critical issue for your members, on which you are asking him or her to accomplish a "big lift," you're going to make an enemy, even if this administrator does the right thing and helps your cause. They will do the work, accomplish the lift, and then forever label you a "taker".

Just as in other aspects of your chamber work, you will want to come up with measurements in the relationship-building game. One of Joel Blackwell's simple measurement tools for this critical activity is: "How many legislators know my active members by name?"

### ***Lobbying fundamentals***

In the end, "...under all the emotional, political and economic overlay, 90% of modern lobbying campaigns use the same methods:"<sup>13</sup>

Define the Issue: You must make it understandable, clearly stated, and logically presented in no more than two double-spaced pages. If it takes you more than three minutes to explain your basic concept, you need more editing.

Find a champion: You need a legislator or administration person who is a believer to carry and promote your bill or proposal.

Develop an accurate "friends and enemies" list: You need to know who's with you and who's against you. Maximize the one (through coalitions, etc.) and derail the other!

Monitor: Keeping track of movements of the bill through committee structures is critical to the timing of your other activities.

Create a constituent connection: Whether through grassroots voter- communication, contributions, media or otherwise, you need to make the legislator believe there is interest and concern back home.

Communicate: Use every avenue to communicate with all of the decision makers on this issue.

Pursue the goal persistently: Don't go away.

Compromise: Within the pre-described limits of your definition of victory, you must be willing to make some deals. Politics is the art of compromise and policies are determined through politics.

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<sup>13</sup> Ernest & Elisabeth Wittenberg, "How To Win In Washington," p. 2.

### ***Get it out there***

Making the policy agenda of the chamber real and public is the first and most important lobbying function you can do. The strength of the chamber, its board and its reputation go out with the distribution of a program or document of this kind. It *is* lobbying to formulate and circulate it. The more widely it is circulated, the more influential a document it is.

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**It is lobbying to formulate and circulate your agenda.**

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The same is true of issue-specific position papers and formal letters. In an even more direct way, the same lesson applies to public testimony before hearings, panels and gatherings. You saying it *is* lobbying. That is why it is so important to appear at as many public functions and hearings as possible. Being there can hurt your schedule and your family life, but being involved in government affairs, especially at the local level, is not a day job.

In terms of staff actually lobbying an issue face-to-face, go back to the relationship selling ideas mentioned above. You want to establish relationships that allow you to maintain contact with county executives, city councilmen and senators, so that when you need to work with them on a specific issue, they trust you, they'll return the phone calls, and they know you will be fair. They also know that you're providing information and opportunities that are helpful to them - you're not just a taker.

The discussion over the occasional crisis issue is expected by the elected officials. Sometimes you will convince the elected official and sometimes you won't, but if you invest the time in building a relationship, you will have access, as well as a predisposition on their part to try to help you.

### ***Impact sells***

"In God we trust. . . all others bring data." That maxim from the Total Quality Management school carries over into the public policy arena. Elected officials don't want to hear complaints. They get complaints all the time. Based on the complaints and whining they hear, they could easily vote any way they desire on any issue, saying that they are pleasing their constituents. What makes you and your position stand out is when you demonstrate impact. Impact sells.

How do you show impact? Sometimes, you make the case with survey results or economic data. Other times, it can be hard anecdotal ammunition about what is going to happen at XYZ and ABC companies if a certain bill is passed, or a specific reform is not made. If you can obtain real impact data from five significant employers in your region, it will have more impact on a legislator than a scientific Harris poll.

The Florida State Chamber of Commerce uses a technique we could all borrow to multiply the input and impact evidence we receive from members. They measure it in feet! Their grassroots team uses a fax-back and email response system to get real-life stories of hardship and lost opportunity from real companies. Then, they hypothetically (or even actually!) lay those hundreds of faxes and printed email messages end to end and announce to the press and the legislature that the pain Florida business people reaches higher than the Empire State Building, or from Key Biscayne to Key Largo, or whatever. This making of a mountain out of an electronic molehill is just one way to use creative presentations to help policy makers visualize the scope of the problems faced by employers.

It is important to remember that the backup information you provide should focus most documenting the *problem*, not the *solutions*. Remember, what you know about is your members and their problems . . . their pain.

Data, evidence and demonstrated impact related to the issue are important tools for three reasons:

1. They give you credibility and something to talk about other than just saying “please” to the legislator.
2. Impact holds up when the argument shifts to the other side and what they are saying about the issue. You’ll need something to hang onto when the official starts to tell you why he/she has to take the other side into account.
3. Most importantly, your representatives, if they want to make something happen in the legislature or executive chamber, must have something to take to *their* peers and leaders. Even if you’ve already made them predisposed to help you, through good relationship sales work, these individuals can’t just go to their fellow-legislators or committee chairmen on an issue and say: “My chamber would *really* rather have me vote the other way.” Give them something to fight with! Your friends at city hail and the state legislature need to wave something around that is durable and believable during conferences and caucuses. They lobby each other and they lobby the leaders. . . help them. Data and impact are the keys. *Not a whine, a weapon.*

### ***To be, or not to be... there***

Do you need to go to Albany, Austin, Columbia or Washington in order to lobby on state and federal issues? The answer to that question will probably relieve you, but will also place a bit more responsibility on you. If you question the need for you and your members to travel to the seats of government, the answer is... A little bit goes a long way!

Basically, occasional appearances in the halls of distant government are a credibility issue. You want legislators to take you seriously. If they see you making a trip to *them* occasionally - especially a trip to deal with an important, timely issue - they’ll take you more seriously when you’re working with them back home or by phone. So will their staffs.

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**You may actually get a longer, better meeting  
in the Capitol than back home.**

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The other ironic fact is that rank and file state legislators and first term congressional representatives often have more time for you in the legislative office building than they do back home. When they’re home, they have the usual constituent service burdens, political rings to kiss, family responsibilities and regular life work like the rest of us. If you have a bit of patience with the changeability of their calendars, you may just get a longer, more productive meeting in the Capitol than in the district.

If you take volunteers with you on these trips, don’t promise them too much about the effectiveness of the visits. The sessions can be very perfunctory and they sometimes seem like a waste to a busy businessperson who you manage to drag off for a day of rep visits. Your influential volunteers have little patience with elected officials who cancel meetings and stick visitors with junior aides. Let your members know that the trips to Washington and the state capital can be frustrating, but they have value even if you get stood up. Guilt can be a very powerful motivator. Your follow-up letter and phone calls will make subtle points about how disappointed your members were, how much the CEO of East Side Trust was looking forward to meeting the legislator, etc. Sometimes the apologetic phone call from the elected official who stood you up can be the best time to make the point for the policy you were trying to espouse on the trip to the Capitol.

## ***Making the most of meetings***

If you're dealing with state government, planning your trips to visit legislators early in the session, or early in the process of deliberations on your issue, is very important. Early communication on issues makes a big difference because when an issue is first brought to public attention, county executives or legislators are often as unfamiliar with it as their constituents. The group that gets to the legislators early, with good information, has a real edge. Your good communication at the right time can lead to elected folks answering questions about the issue using *your* data and spin, because they haven't had time to do all the homework themselves. Once they begin to go on record with these statements about the issue, they will usually try to stay consistent as the issue moves along.

To line up a more productive session with your mayor at City Hall, you need to do minimal homework about the committee and session calendar. Match your visit to relatively slow periods if possible, depending on the urgency of your issue.

Sometimes, it can be most effective to set these meetings up with legislators or town supervisors and then send just *one* member - an articulate plant manager or the president of a well-known, mid-size company. A one-on-one session between an elected official and a real employer can sometimes push the issue to the front burner more quickly than a formal discussion or a meeting with you.

Whether you are bringing a group to city hall, visiting with a highway superintendent visiting Washington, you want to make the most of the meetings. In George Alderson's book, *A Complete Handbook for the Citizen Lobbyist*, he spells out "Ten Ways to Talk to Your Congressman." These ten guiding steps (paraphrased here) work for virtually any level of government environment, whether in home offices or at the Capitol. And, they hold true whether the meeting is for a small group or for you as an individual representative of your members:<sup>14</sup>

1. Get an appointment: It's more than just a courtesy. Dropping in on a legislator or high-level local official, especially with volunteers in tow, really puts legislators in a ticklish political spot.
2. Don't be awed: Mayors and senators have kids with problems, slices off the tee, trouble with their knees, bad breath in the morning and worries about the long-term security of their jobs, just like you do. Talk to them like people - many of them even qualify!
3. Show that you are a friendly person: The more confrontational you are, the less likely you are to achieve your goal.
4. Show that you are serious: A couple of formal introductions of the people with you, extra copies on hand of whatever materials you're leaving behind, dropping the name of a prominent friend of the elected leader, etc. make the representative know you're to be taken seriously.

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<sup>14</sup> G. Alderson & E. Sentman, *How You Can Influence Congress*, p. 90.

5. Be a good listener: Usually, time you spend listening to your elected officials in individual or small-group meetings is bonus time. You will still get your chance to deliver your message before or after they do their talking. Be an active listener, though. Ask questions, interact and offer comments on their ideas.
6. Don't let the representative evade the issue: If you hear terms like, "I share your concern," or "I'm sure the committee will consider your comment," you haven't gotten through yet. The "soft yes" has been the death of thousands of otherwise well-conceived campaigns.
7. Don't assume the person you're visiting is against your cause: This applies even if they have said publicly that they are against you.
8. Make him/her feel good about the issue: One of the best ways to do this is to help them see who is on the different sides of the issue. Deal with this openly and candidly and you'll go a long way toward giving them comfort in choosing your position.
9. Press for a commitment: Tell her your members want to know what she thinks about this position and you need to report to them that she will be on board or not. Even if you don't end up receiving the commitment you want, the act of asking and pressing is important in its own right. The same questions that may lead to "no" are the *only* questions that can lead to "yes."
10. Work the staff: Bob Dole holds that it is *better* to see the staff first. "If you get the staff interested, you're on your way," he says. "Most of the time, you waste a whole step by insisting on seeing the member personally at that first meeting."<sup>15</sup>

As the meeting is breaking up in your representative's office, try the *Columbo Technique*. Tom Hopkins' bible for salespeople, "How to Master the Art of Selling Anything," describes this very effective tactic. You remember in those old Columbo episodes when the sloppy investigator would finish that first interview with the murder suspect and get up to leave. "Thank you.. . I don't want to take up any more of your time," he would say as he headed for the door, with the suspect thinking he had stumped the detective. Then, Columbo would stop and casually say to the at-ease suspect, "Just one more question. . ." Colombo would then deliver the, "Do-you-still-beat-your-dog?" incriminating question that the villain was unprepared for, and unable to avoid.

Save one of your action questions until the very end of the meeting. "Oh, Councilman Fernbank, I almost forgot - would you mind calling Mayor Gilletti's Chief of Staff to fill him in on our discussion. I've been trying to reach him for days without any luck." Whatever the question is, the answer will provide you with useful insights as to the real commitment level of the official to your cause *and* something to follow up with them about later.

### ***Horses, champions, sponsors & mules***

Chambers of commerce seldom have full-time staff people to work issues on a daily basis in the halls of government. It is therefore especially important on priority issues for you find not only *support* for your positions, but actual sponsors of legislation and proposals who will *champion* your issue throughout the year, or until it's won. In Washington, individual legislators (and sometimes powerful staff members) are called "horses."

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<sup>15</sup> Ernest & Elisabeth Wittenberg, *How To Win In Washington*, p. 22.

In the ideal world, the horse of choice at any level of government would be the chairperson of the appropriate committee, who just happens to have seniority and represent your region. Realistically, your horses will seldom have this pedigree! Champions come in all shapes and sizes though. Sometimes, the horse might be an especially charismatic new city councilman who is the darling of the media. Giving these upstarts a meaty issue to take in front of cameras can provide you both with what you need. Other times, the champion is a relatively unknown representative who happens to represent one of the major employers in the region. Their clout is multiplied through the fame-by-association they receive from the multi-national corporation in their district.

Whoever the champion, and however they are chosen (or given to you), your very first job is to get that representative and her staff committed to your issue. Elisabeth Wittenberg, in her book, *How to Win in Washington*, put it clearly: “Nothing will be as effective as the prospective champion’s personal belief in the cause you’re espousing.”

Help them know the issue inside and out. Conduct a briefing for the staff, if the elected official has any. Provide sample scripts for press events. Get thank you notes from your members to the newly acquired horse, expressing . . . appreciation for their leadership and confidence in ultimate success under the guidance of such a wise and powerful county legislator.

Sometimes, the more appropriate label for your champion will be a “mule”, rather than a “horse”. This relatively obscure representative is willing to go to bat for you and your issue. A mule will be stubborn and not go along with legislative leadership who oppose his (and your) position, no matter how much they are bullied. In some cases, when this councilman’s vote is needed on other proposals, a mule can be a very effective champion. This is highly risky for anyone in government, so you are unlikely to get this kind of commitment very often, and you must be very cautious in asking for it.

### ***The Schuler Rule***

#### **A-S-K**

*Ask and it will be granted unto you.*

*Seek and you will find.*

*Knock and it will be opened*

Ray Schuler, founding president of The Business Council of New York State, was a very wise and experienced political player. One piece of advice he used to impart to his disciples sounded completely contradictory at first, then, as the reverse logic set in, made complete sense. He told his staff: “The more you ask of somebody, the more they think they owe you. If you ask for a favor - and they deliver - they spend the rest of their lives trying to justify being nice to you.”

This is important to remember when working with elected officials and, more importantly, their staffs. Don’t let yourself feel that pushing them to help your members will lead to elected officials making themselves unavailable to you in the future. Working in the public policy arena certainly involves give-and-take and the expectation of returned favors, but the well doesn’t dry up just because it is tapped. The opposite is often true. Asking frequently for reasonable things from elected officials and their staffs somehow seems to fill the well of good will toward you and your organization. So, don’t be bashful.

### ***A team approach***

One lobbying basic that is often forgotten is that it's not a one-person job. In the government affairs process, the importance of your office support staff, no matter how large or small in number, cannot be overstated. Empower your staff - even if it's a staff of one - to come up with solutions to specific government relations communications and action requirements. If you give them the challenge, most of the time, they'll solve it.

How is your office equipped to handle an emergency legislative situation?

- When the State Chamber, the U.S. Chamber, a board member, or somebody at the county office building calls and says, "We need the chamber's position on highway spending by 4:00 pm," what does your staff do if you're not present?
- Is there a process in place for contacting the decision makers?
- Is there a staff process to deal with an absent boss when the press wants to talk to somebody? (In one real case a staff person told the press that the chamber president was on vacation in Hawaii when a reporter called to get the organization's reaction a plant closing.)
- Does your staff have a fax tree or broadcast fax file set up for you to get word out widely and in a hurry?
- Do you have a process in place for printing up and processing letters on members' letterhead?

There are also specific services that the staff can do for you and your members. Encourage them to establish a kind of internal clip service, collecting news stories on issues, the mayor, or whatever. Get staff involved in event planning, giving them the assignment for instance, to make sure that the right representatives are routinely invited to things and "schmoozed" when they get there. Have them make phone calls to legislative or agency staffs to see if they need anything for their boss who is attending the meeting. Over time, your staff people can develop their own relationships with the staffs in government offices.

And, of course, the most basic, but most important function of an effective government relations operation resides with your staff. They handle list and mailing (including email) management. *This is not an incidental item.* The ability to track, code, retrieve and manage specific mailing lists, by political district, by issue area, or by whatever other criteria, can be your most valuable weapon.

Empower your staff to figure this out and take ownership of these in-office processes involving government relations. Make sure that they know how important this work is (among the top three concerns of the organization) and that this activity is part of their job descriptions, not just an extra duty.

### ***You didn't tell me how to lobby!***

You probably noticed that relatively few words were expended in this chapter on the tactics of an actual face-to-face presentation with your elected or appointed official. You may have been expecting a silver bullet or magic words that you could utilize in such meetings. As noted earlier, however, lobbying is a series of processes, not one pinnacle moment. If the groundwork has been laid, the research done and the steps taken to predispose the official to your point of view, your sales work is 90 percent done. The request for the order, as they call it in the selling profession, is just one more process step, among many. In the chapters that follow, you'll learn about more of these processes and action steps.

## CHAPTER 6

### Coalitions

#### My life as a strange bedfellow!

One of the most important roles a chamber plays in swaying the body politic is to serve as the prime builder of coalitions. Coalitions are, for most business-related issues, a vital component of success.

By their very nature, employer-related issues are not populist. ‘Every lawmakers’ chief interest is in getting reelected. So lobbyists see it as their job to persuade lawmakers that voters are on their side.’<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, on business issues, this persuasion is hard to accomplish because the math works against you in many cases. On labor-related issues, there are more workers than employers. Virtually all Americans consider themselves friends of the environment, while the number of people with sympathy for over regulated businesses is paltry. And, so on.

The only way to overcome these apparently insurmountable odds is to build coalitions of self-interested groups which may be very different than your chamber, but nonetheless share your interests regarding a certain issue or problem. You need to create what Wittenberg calls: “. . . a groundswell without a real consistency.” Keep in mind that, almost every interest group that needs power, including yours, is a minority. Your challenge is to create the perception of a majority, though in reality, your base is a collection of minority opinion groups.

You need to create strategic alliances, which Robert Dilenschneider, in his book, *On Power*, defined as: “. . . an official bond between organizations.”

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#### Coalition building is lobbying!

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The coalition relationships you form work best when they are formal (so that they can be public). Issues should be tackled on an organizational level rather than between individuals (so that the issues can survive personality conflicts).

What these relationships don’t need to be is permanent. Strategic, by its definition, refers to a strategy to achieve an objective, not to something lasting. When your issue has run its course, most strategic alliances or coalitions should naturally dissolve. That is not a bad thing. If the alliance was good for both parties, it might be resurrected at a future time, but not necessarily. The most effective coalitions are often those that could never stand together after a specific issue is handled.

Because of the diverse nature of your membership and the outstanding contacts inherent in your work, chambers of commerce can be the most important coalition builders on many important issues. That is why you get so many appeals to help form coalitions by advocates for special interests.

When a city councilman sees a coalition of employer groups like yours, that’s good. But when he sees a coalition of apparent enemies or disinterested parties banded together on a specific issue that is even better. It makes a real impression.

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<sup>16</sup> J. Birnbaum, *The Lobbyists*, p. 25

In the book, *The Lobbyists*, author Jeffrey Birnbaum notes that rather than seeing hardcore lobbyists for a specific corporate interest group, lawmakers are more willing to see “. . . a coalition of interests that claim to care about the public good, often led by organizations that, politically speaking, were less offensive to an elected official than were the self-interested corporations . . .” Birnbaum calls this: “. . . creating coalitions of nontraditional allies.”<sup>17</sup>

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### **Coalitions of nontraditional allies get noticed.**

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One rural chamber was fighting on behalf of one of its few large employers to secure a permit for a landfill that was absolutely essential to keeping the plant open. Because the landfill would only be used to bury non-toxic, organic sludge from a water treatment plant, the chamber realized that it might be able to find at least one environmental group that would listen to its story about the benign nature of the facility. Early on in the process, before any fight between “good and evil” could reach the press, the chamber approached the least militant green group it could find.

The chamber hosted a meeting between the environmental group and the technical specialists from the company. Descriptions of the limited planned uses of the plant were offered and the representative of the environmental activists were able to ask their questions about source and treatment of the materials. The company also laid out the potential negative environmental legacy that could remain on the main plant site if it were to close prior to completion of various ongoing re-remediation activities. In the end, the environmental group joined the chamber at the press conference following the formal town approval of the new site. The tacit approval of the people most concerned about the environment had made a big difference to the town review board and county health department officials. While not formal allies, the two sides found a way for both to win through a loose public bond. The greens were able to demonstrate the steps they were taking to monitor the situation and the chamber took center stage in maintaining a major employer for the community and member for the organization.

Such odd coalitions might be the most attention grabbing for your cause, but they are not the only effective kind of coalition (and, they can also be dangerous if you pick the wrong group). On business-related issues, it is also effective to create coalitions that simply multiply your message, making sure that all the faces of the affected people are visible.

### ***The Coalition Lobbying Effort (The Iacocca Model)***

The most widely known example is probably the coalition lobbying effort launched by Chrysler when Lee Iacocca was attempting to convince the U.S. Senate to lend him hundreds of millions of dollars to prevent the bankruptcy of the twelfth largest company in the country.

Iacocca’s problem was that Chrysler only had plants in eight states, making it unlikely that pressure from autoworkers at his plants alone could turn the tide that was swelling against him in the Capitol. His solution was to mobilize all 4,000 dealers in the 50 states, along with suppliers of everything from glass to radios. “Soon the collapse of Chrysler seemed to involve an economic collapse of a large number of companies, rather than just lost jobs for a few thousand auto workers.”<sup>18</sup>

These kinds of coalitions can be made for almost every issue you and your members could face. Just sit down for an hour with your current team and brainstorm about other people affected by the issue you are addressing. Keep in mind that these coalitions are not marriages - they are simply brief romances. Your goal is to find all the groups

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<sup>17</sup> J. Birnbaum, “The Lobbyists,” p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> E. & E. Wittenberg, “How to Win In Washington,” p. 120.

who will help you, even if the get-together is only for a mutually satisfying interlude on one individual issue.

For instance, on workers' compensation issues, the farmers should be mobilized to help business owners. They are also helpful on property tax fights. To overcome N.I.M.B.Y. (not-in-my-back-yard) or N.I.M.T.O. (not-in-my-term-of-office) problems affecting development in your community, reach out to senior citizens who own their own homes, but are on fixed incomes. Recruit them with the probability of property tax relief when the new project is completed. On energy-related issues, universities might be a surprise ally and coalition member, right along with your manufacturers, since both are heavy users of power.

One chamber, seeking designation for its community as an economic development zone, created a coalition that included the student councils of every school in the region. Without the EDZ perks, the region's largest employer would be forced to move to Puerto Rico to take advantage of incentives for pharmaceutical firms. The powerful, simple message of school children who would be affected by the plant's demise helped change the debate from one focused on tax breaks for a multi-national corporation, to one based on families and schools. The governor eventually expanded the number of designated zones to ensure that this community was among those to qualify.

The mere process of coalition building *is* lobbying. The sessions at which you pitch the potential coalition members allow you to spread the word on your issue within another group of influential members of the community - even if the group eventually fails to deliver much to the coalition. And, policy makers will find out that you are working to build the coalition, which produces yet another impression of your message on the right audience.

### ***What steps do you take to build the coalition?***

- Brainstorm to create the list of potential allies.
- Carefully craft your issue in terms that make sense for a variety of potential allied groups. You need to be careful here that your organization maintains control over the core message. Before you compromise this message to make it more attractive to an ally, be sure you don't corrupt, dilute or confuse the issue.
- Assign the volunteers who are most affected by the issue introduce the potential allies to your cause. "When someone takes the trouble to visit you and talk with you about her or his organization, it means something, especially when you know that person is not being paid to hustle you."<sup>19</sup> This opening discussion is conducted only to ask them if they would be willing to talk about linking up with the coalition. This meeting is somewhat like a first date, in that what your representatives are doing is determining whether there is any spark of romance. If there is, then you proceed.
- Invite potential coalition members to an activity that involves those groups already committed to the cause. It is not necessary for this activity to be a large gathering of all those involved in the cause. More often than not, such rally-type events actually turn off would-be members of your coalition because so little is actually accomplished. It is important to make this initial meeting an action event.
- Offer to give a presentation to the board of directors or decision-making group for the potential ally.

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<sup>19</sup> Si Kahn, *Organizing: A Grassroots Guide for Grassroots Organizing*, p.83.

- Get an answer. Don't allow your recruit to stall your efforts and put the coalition efforts on hold while they think about whether they can buy into your position. After one meeting with staff or a top representative and one meeting with their board (if needed), call the question and find out one way or the other. In some cases, groups that are on the fence or secretly loyal to your opponents will deliberately slow down your progress.
- As soon as a new group joins the coalition, give them something to do - immediately. They need a chore, a phone call, a press release, and a trip to city hall. In elective politics, money is the symbol of buy-in and commitment. In coalitions, work is the capital of exchange.

Keep in mind that sometimes you will be the group asked to join coalitions. Try to be open to these requests because they can increase your organization's agenda and visibility for relatively low investments of personal and political capital. But be careful. Make sure that the coalition fits your mission and overall agenda for employers and the community.

### ***Levels of commitment to your partners***

In his book, "Collaboration for Change," Arthur Himmelman studies four distinct levels of commitment to working relationships: networking, coordinating, cooperating and collaborating. Networking involves sharing information for mutual gain. Coordinating consists of shared planning. Cooperating adds a step relating to sharing resources (both human and capital). And, the collaboration level creates partners who share decisions, risks and rewards - two entities linked for a common cause.

Even though your relationship with a potential ally is likely to be short-lived, it is still critical to pick the right level of involvement. The level you want is the one that gets the job done for your members and your community. Do not always assume that full collaboration is the only way to achieve your goals. Sometimes, it's enough for two or more entities just to stay out of each others' way. At other times, a few dollars thrown into a pool to buy some services accomplishes the objectives, without exchanging any vows or rings.

On the other hand, you need to publicize the names of the individuals and organizations you've recruited, both to acknowledge their commitment and to get maximum lobbying value from the arrangement. In every media and legislator communication, find a way to bring up the breadth and depth of the coalition. A Michigan Chamber tort reform coalition went so far as to use the back of their letterhead/press release forms to carry a list of people and groups involved in the fight. At the bottom of the front side of the paper, they listed the five biggest and most powerful groups, with a note that said, "List continues on back of this page." The backside featured a screened down, packed-in list of supporters in alphabetical order. *Very impressive.* One way or the other, get your new friends' names out there.

### ***Regional cooperation***

Coalition building also extends to the establishment of a regional network for public policy activities. Most states are large enough to break down into logical groups of chambers with similar regional priorities. These regional networks can be very effective resources for helping to shape public policy.

First of all, many legislative districts go beyond the constituency borders of chambers of commerce. It makes sense for neighboring chambers to work together when they share mutual legislators. Regional networks also help build accountability among staffs and volunteers of chambers. Members don't want to let other members of the alliance down and will therefore do their part on specific legislative initiatives.

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**Regional networks make volunteers  
accountable to each other.**

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The structure of this regional government relations program can evolve over time. In the beginning, it might just be a few shared programs during the year and perhaps an issue forum annually. Eventually, it could involve the regional alliance taking formal, united positions on issues.

To get from Point A to Point B, it's a good idea to get the volunteers from allied groups together, as well as the staff people. A mixer once or twice a year, with a very informal program can help. A retreat to help formulate and share strategies and priorities is another way to accomplish this kind of shared commitment to working together. You might want to issue a joint policy priority list each year that is signed by the chairs of each chamber in the alliance. Unlike coalitions, which are created to fight on a given issue, regional alliances should be as permanent as possible. Sometimes, these regional coalitions go on for a year or two without much apparent need for the connection. Eventually, an issue will arise when you will need each other and the network, trust and tradition of cooperation will already be established.

## CHAPTER 7

### Grassroots...

#### . . . Planting and Fertilizing

Now, you get promoted to “grassroots organizer.” No doubt, this is a lofty position that you have sought since high school. Well, you’ve made it! Whether running events or developing membership, your day job probably already has you immersed in almost all of the activities of a grassroots organizer. Now, it’s just a matter of directing that experience in a slightly different direction.

“Organizers, like many professionals, sometimes exaggerate the skill needed to do what they do. They talk in a mysterious language: actions, models, constituencies, coalitions, agendas, strategies, tactics. This kind of shoptalk sometimes makes people believe that there is something very complicated about the organizing process. But, in fact, good organizing is an uncomplicated way of doing things.”<sup>20</sup>

Grassroots is a broad and general term referring to any and all activities that involve individual constituents or groups of constituents in the lobbying process. Columnist Charles Bailey, in a *Washington Monthly* article entitled, “Snakes in the Grass,” calls grassroots lobbying an “oxymoron,” since the whole idea of lobbying had to do with working *in the lobby* and not in home districts.<sup>21</sup><sup>21</sup> The definitions of both lobbying and grassroots have obviously evolved over the years.

In general, if chamber staff does the work, it’s not grassroots lobbying. If volunteers do it, even if under strict direction from staff, it’s a grassroots activity. Because the term itself is so broadly defined, and the myriad possibilities for action and issues are so numerous, one size does not fit all!

#### *Make a little noise*

The tactics and strategies you choose are less important than the fact that you and your members are taking public and visible action on an issue within a district. Certainly, in the ideal, large numbers or significant impacts are desired, but elected officials are influenced by *any* noise about an issue in their jurisdiction or district. They don’t like the threat or reality of any disgruntled constituents. Political figures like everybody to be happy, especially influential people in the community.

When your members take on an issue, they naturally receive more attention than an average citizen. *American Demographics* magazine devoted a story to the impact of a group they labeled, “The Influentials” on politics in this country. The article provided a statistical breakdown of the people who actually make things happen in communities, and, by extension, in the state and nation. While this group is a minority, representing less than 10 percent of the population, its members literally run the country. They are the major employers, publishers, education administrators, activist volunteers, local elected officials and intelligentsia of each community. Mobilize the influentials, sometimes referred to as “grasstops” to speak out and participate in grassroots activities and you will influence the policy formation process - perhaps not all the way to your desired outcome, but you’ll have a good start.

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<sup>20</sup> Si Kahn, Organizing,” p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Bailey, Snakes in the Grass,” *The Washington Monthly*, Sept. 1996

### ***Parties of five***

For some chambers, the most effective and practical method for grassroots lobbying is the cozy dinner for five - you and some members who are willing to tell their story and make your point for you. Who's in this little party of five (a meal is optional)?

- One legislator or administration official (just one for this kind of meeting!)
- A specialist on the issue who understands the preferred legislative or regulatory solutions sought by your group
- Two or three members who manage companies that would be helped (or hurt) by the policy being considered
- You. Being there yourself is important for monitoring purposes, but also for your stature in the eyes of members and government

The discussion at these parties might not naturally get around to the topic at hand until dessert. Spend five minutes, by phone or in person, scripting the other members of your party on how the issue will be broached gracefully.

### ***Plant tours***

For other chambers, the best grassroots lobbying is done on a plant tour, where a legislator or mayor can see what you mean when you talk about regulatory overkill or infrastructure collapse. The greatest benefit of these tours, however, is their after effect. Once a government official has been through a work setting and seen his/her constituents making livings and careers at a given company, the management of that company's clout with the representative goes up 100 percent. Whenever possible, arrange for the legislator or administrator to meet a couple of workers on the floor. You and the plant manager don't need to script these people. Just pick folks who care about their jobs and like their employers.

In most cases, the professional lobbyists, technical experts, staffs, counsels and specialists help the policy maker solve problems and craft legislation or regulations to fix them. Having the names of some of these people and their organizations on hand is a good idea when taking the official on a plant tour or into meetings with volunteers.

### ***Rallies***

You can run rallies on issues, with pledges for action by participants secured on the spot. During the meeting, just provide them with pledge cards that specify certain levels of activity on a given issue. Some chambers conduct issue-specific action meetings. A small group of people interested in a specific issue will gather and talk over the facts, the problem and tentative solutions and move immediately to some level of action - no fuss and no heavy follow-up chores. You should serve as facilitator and researcher, then just let them choose, as a group or individually, from a menu of immediate action steps.

### ***Letters, letters, letters***

And, of course, there are letter-writing and email campaigns. Business organizations have great difficulty trying to counter the volume of letters generated by organized labor, consumer groups or other large, unified advocacy organizations. We have to make up in quality, what we lack in quantity.

Don't believe the legislative staffers and others who discount and disparage letter-writing campaigns. George Alderson, in the handbook referred to previously, put it this way: "Because members of the House and Senate constantly are confronted with an impossible workload of legislation, it's only natural that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. If a congressman is getting phone calls and letters from his district asking him to vote against H.R.9620, he'll probably find it easier to go along with what they ask than to defend a vote in favor of the bill."

Elected representatives of every stripe often deplore letter-writing campaigns that have been directed at them or a bill they favor. Yet, Alderson insists that when legislators want to sway their colleagues, they routinely call on various interest groups to initiate just such a tactic. "A [representative] knows that behind every letter campaign is an organization with strong views on an issue and with members or adherents who are likely to remember his position on this issue in the next election."

It is really remarkable, and surprising, how many issues are decided by mayors, county executives, governors and legislators who have received no mail, or just a handful of letters on that subject. But good, personal letters, stressing real impact of legislation on real people or companies, can make a difference.

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**Government officials hate letter-writing campaigns, except  
when they're aimed at an opponent's position.**

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Your members can be mobilized to organize these small, high-quality campaigns. In fact, probably no group is in a better position to generate good letters than chambers of commerce.

Senator Jim Wright of New York put it clearly: "As a group, members of Congress are probably more influenced by 10 or 12 well written, obviously sincere and personal letters, than we would be by 1,000 names on a petition."<sup>22</sup>

If a county legislator gets ten, personal and thoughtful letters from influential members of a community, the legislators and their staffs take it seriously (many of them positively freak out!). For state legislators and congressmen, it might take 20-30 such personal letters. (Note that this simply gets the elected official to take the issue seriously, not necessarily to do what you want her to do. *Winning* the issue will take other steps.)

The reality, however, is that unless the issue involves the elimination of an existing government program, or the closure of a government facility, elected officials seldom get ten *real* letters... from anybody! This should be encouraging to you. You don't need a mountain of mail (which you couldn't produce anyway). You need a few dozen pieces of good mail. If you can produce these, you'll create just enough indecision and fear in the legislator to at least get your message heard.

"Central to the new grassroots lobbying is fear: Congressmen afraid of angering voters. . . and this new fear-driven multimedia lobbying has proved its effectiveness"<sup>23</sup>

One widely used grassroots tactic doesn't seem to work very well, according to both professional organizers and legislators. That tactic is the petition. Elected officials have learned over the years, from watching the process at work, that it is basically easy to get citizens to sign just about anything. Almost nothing is invested by the constituents when they sign the sheet outside the grocery store, so nothing needs to be granted by the elected official. Use your time in other ways.

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<sup>22</sup> E. & E. Wittenburg, "How To Win In Washington," p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Charles W. Bailey, "Snakes in the Grass," *The Washington Monthly*, Sept. 1996

### ***Phone banks***

On some very important issues, the grassroots answer may be phone banks, which work very well when you know ahead of time that a key vote is coming up on an issue that's near and dear to your members. Phone banks are really member-to-member grassroots work - the same kind of thing you use for membership drives. The calls from the banks are made to companies, not to target elected officials. Instead of asking someone to join (which costs money and is hard), you are asking them to make a phone call or send a fax (which is easy).

### ***Witnesses for the defense***

There are many other ways to involve members in the process. Volunteers do a much more credible job than staff on testimony before public hearings. Testimony from a chamber exec is seldom a surprise. The people running the hearing have a pretty good idea of where you, as a chamber executive, stand and they know, or at least they think they know what you're going to say. When a CEO or plant manager talks, however, the panel of policy makers will be curious, courteous (usually) and less likely to use the remarks as an opportunity for a coffee break.

One chamber recently multiplied the impact and effectiveness of one company's testimony by having additional business people on hand in the audience. The designated hitter was testifying before a local planning board to encourage a zoning change that would allow some light industry into a formerly commercial (abandoned) strip of land. The chamber executive recruited the business leader from among those who cared most about the issue, but he also lined up four more business people who agreed to be recognized, but not to speak. The first line of the witness's testimony was to acknowledge that he was speaking on behalf of the three gentlemen and two ladies in the back of the room. He noted the company names of each of the folks who were lending moral support. The panel listened.

In terms of the effectiveness of your own, or your member's presentation before public hearings, there are five simple rules:<sup>24</sup>

1. Keep it short (supply longer, written testimony to accompany your remarks)
2. Don't read it
3. Don't be arrogant or argumentative
4. Don't guess (admit it when you don't know the answer to a question)
5. Illustrate, whenever possible (no need for a slide show, just a graph or two nicely mounted on a poster board to illustrate your points)

One note on these kinds of proceedings - Business people will often get very frustrated with the process. Hearings are always boring and usually poorly run. Your witnesses will question the value of their participation and wonder what the heck they're doing wasting their time on what they are likely to call: "The bunch of 'incompetents' running the government."

As a chamber professional who is used to making your valued members feel comfortable, important and pampered, it can be pretty uncomfortable to sit there while the angry red blotches move up from the

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<sup>24</sup> E. & E. Wittenberg, "How To Win In Washington," p. 111.

volunteer's collar in the face of rude treatment by some zoning board member. Relax. Honest. . . they'll survive.

In the long run, most business people who take part as witnesses get more involved in the issue after testifying, even if they are humiliated going through it. And, these members also appreciate - even if they hate going through it - the opportunity they were given to be involved in a tangible way in the policy formation process. And there's a side benefit. they begin to understand your problems and how hard it is to make the government elephant dance!

### ***"Knowledge is good."***

Some of you may recognize the profound motto of the fictitious Faber College (home of *Animal House*). Communication and information dissemination are the basic foundations upon which the entire grassroots lobbying process at your chamber will be built.

Information exchange breeds interest and the possibility of action by your members. Tell them. Tell them again. Tell them a new way.

It may feel like it could take forever, but you must persevere and provide your members with constant information about public policy if you expect them to do anything about it. Being informed gives members confidence and makes them mad. Mad is good. In fact, it is absolutely essential. Good information gives volunteers the two things they need most to be motivated to act: Hope and fear.

### ***Tell what to whom?***

The publics are: Your members and board of directors, your elected officials, the influentials in your community, your staff, the media and the general public.

The message is: Protect and promote the interests of business. The specific details of the message will change with circumstances and issues.

The good news is, you don't have to re-invent the wheel or construct this communications foundation on your own. You can use what you've got and what other people provide for you:

- Your newsletter is the best grassroots vehicle you've got, but very few chambers use it in this way. Your monthly or annual president's message should not be used exclusively to say: "Hey, how are ya . . . we're all doing great at The Chamber." Use this valuable space and your potentially powerful newsletter.
- Your website and electronic communication is a surefire venue for attaining instant recognition among your members.
- Introductions for every kind of program you run (such as monthly breakfasts, etc.) can be set up to include public affairs issues.
- Single-issue tent cards. One chamber places a simple description of an issue at the place settings of breakfast and luncheon programs (regardless of the nature of the speaker or event). Sad as it may be, many of your best members don't read the issue briefings you put in your newsletters. These simple cards can guarantee that the people who come to your events know the issues.

- Re-distribution of the issue summaries from your state chamber and U.S. Chamber. Re-package these if you want to, but straight from the box also works just fine.
- Excerpts from (and comments on) constituent newsletters of legislators (be sure to balance them between parties and houses), county executives and school boards can summarize them nicely while providing even more support for your cause.
- Point/counter-point position pages from two competing sides on an issue facing your community make good, informative reading. Just ask a representative from each group to write their section and distribute it.
- Excerpts from policy magazines, newspapers, trade publications, other people's newsletters, etc. (just paraphrase or quote with attribution) are suited for explaining many issues.
- Discount subscriptions to policy publications offered to chamber members from publishers and national associations.

Certainly, you need to spend some time selecting the issues you'll present to your members and the sources you want to borrow from. You generally do not, however, have to write a great deal yourself in order to keep your members informed.

Remember the cause of information anxiety described earlier. You must try to be the solution to this problem, rather than one of its causes. Your role is to try to pre-sort, digest and distribute condensed, useful information to your members, who are drowning in paper and broadcast data. If you deliver short bursts of high-quality information about issues and public affairs activity that your members really care about, they will worship the water you walk on. If, on the other hand, you simply stuff their in-baskets with undifferentiated bundles of raw data, full text legislation, long reports of legislative activity and minutes of government affairs committee meetings, they will turn off the entire idea of public policy involvement.

Most chamber of commerce newsletters show little or no evidence that their mission is to protect business. The newsletters promote holiday mixers, member orientations, discount insurance programs, educational opportunities and just about everything except business related government activity and issues.

Members care about these issues. The bigger the member, the less likely they are to care about the annual ear wash fund raiser and the more interested they are in the chamber's role in public affairs. Carrying this information in your newsletter is, among other things, a way to provide a genuine service to your larger members, who often categorize their chamber investment as a straight contribution. Is that how you want them to think of it?

Some chambers also use their membership gatherings as a platform for dissemination of public policy information. Before the general membership breakfast begins, offer a brief update on pending issues. Run these short sessions like three-minute newscasts. Every organization has a ham who would love the job of reading these newscasts. You, however, will probably want the job of writing them.

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**Bigger is not always better on public policy**

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Programs like these can also be used to cut mailing costs. Your most active members are those who attend

your events. These activists are also the most likely to take a role in communicating with elected leaders or other public policy initiatives. If you don't think many of your rank and file members care about such issues, then use simple table handouts at your programs to stimulate interest and action by your activists. It's best if these info/action cards deal with one, or possibly two issues. If you color-code them (always the red card on the table when they arrive at an event), members will eventually begin to look for them and wonder what's hot this month. At the same time, visiting government guests in attendance will find out what your members are learning about these issues.

And, naturally, program offerings themselves should include political and policy topics. At least once each quarter, the chamber should be hosting a speaker who is talking about public policy at some level. Realize that the draw from these events will vary. Members of Congress may or may not be a good ticket. A state chamber or U.S. Chamber representative may be a winner one year and not the next. Regulatory reform may be hot for a time, and then go cold as people become numb about the issue. Even so, you have an obligation, as a chamber, to provide this kind of programming. If you don't, then employers will assume that they must get it from their trade groups, or from a rival business association.

If your expected turnout is low, change the format and the room arrangement to create a round table kind of dialogue, rather than a speech. Everybody will then assume that the meeting was expected to be a small, intimate, problem-solving gathering.

### ***Surveys***

Most chambers do some kind of survey work. On-line and/or mail surveys and questionnaires *are* grassroots tools. Just asking public policy questions of your members reinforces understanding of issues.

The responses themselves can be used to make the case that individual business people care about issues. Use the data to force home the issue. ("What do you mean solid waste doesn't matter to your constituents? Seventy of them just told us in an email survey that it's their number one issue.")

To make surveys an even more effective grassroots tool, structure them to capture the names of the respondents. Web-based and email surveys should automatically include the respondent's name when the response is delivered. For surveys using hard-copy responses, simply apply the individual's *mailing label directly on the survey response form* before you send it out. Then just use a window envelope for your mailing. When the questionnaire response comes back, you'll have the name and address of the respondent. Be sure to make the *last* question of the survey a check-box disclaimer allowing your member to maintain anonymity. Most will not check this box, and even if they do, you can call them up and ask them if you may use their name in communicating with Senator Ramirez about a specific issue.

In addition, surveys and questionnaires motivate and energize your members. If they feel their opinion is being communicated to elected leaders, it helps them get involved in other ways. Questionnaires also help the members understand issues and can serve to draw attention to policies they may not have even considered. Once again, information and understanding are critical to start the grassroots process.

As in the other areas of grassroots activity we've discussed, quantity is not the way to measure the success, or get the most from survey results. If the numbers are slim, use percentages of respondents instead of raw figures. If you've captured the names of the respondents, try to convince them to allow you to use their name in the press release on the results of the survey: "*Sixty-eight percent of the business people answering the annual chamber of commerce survey on priority issues, including Juan DeMarco of DeMarco Oil, think local taxes must be lowered in order to attract new employers to the region.*" Be creative with surveys. Don't lie, just be creative with your data!

No matter how much public affairs information you are currently providing, you can find a way to provide either more or better information. Work to continually improve this aspect of your product. It will pay off in levels of activity, stature for the organization and even investment.

### ***You re all connected***

Another very easy, but valuable grassroots tool is the “email tree”. Very simply, you can ask five active members, in person (once again relying on your activists list), to be a part of your “action alert network”. Yes, there are hardware, software and vendor options for broadcast email and documents to multiple recipients. Do they make member trees obsolete? No. An organizational vehicle like this is important for its peer influence. You want your members to ask each other to help and be accountable to each other when they do. But you need to make it easy. You do the work and provide the core activist with the names, pertinent information and email addresses for five other members.

Try to make these five names make sense for the person you are asking. For instance, if it’s a furniture retailer, you might pick five other retailers in the same strip mall or neighborhood. If the person on your activist list is a manufacturer, you pick five other people who make something, or some people who you know are suppliers to the manufacturer.

The benefit of you picking the names is not only that you relieve them of a burden, it allows you to target the people you want to hit. In addition, your base group of five will undoubtedly distribute the paper, or talk about it at least, with additional folks beyond their assigned names - their own inner circle of business friends. By having you pick them, the selected folks will really be additional names.

You are asking them to handle something very simple, but important. You want to be able to send email messages to them (no more than six times per year) that will be clearly marked: “For chamber email tree. Please forward to the five people in your branch of the tree.” They in turn, agree to serve as your multiplier, sending this short message out immediately, with a cover page that has their company name or logo.

You need to produce a one-page (two at the most) issue alert that gives the overview and the suggested action being requested by your organization. The format or shell for these fax memos can be developed in advance and then all you have to do is create the content.

### ***You're all connected II***

One of the most effective grassroots tools is the conference call. It’s even more effective when the call is set up to include a guest star, such as a county executive, state legislator, recognized lobbyist, or whomever. These calls can be arranged easily and cheaply, but marketing them is important.

Simply send out a mailing or email to a group of your members, indicating that a call-in style conference call will be held at a designated time. The memo must state that a formal position from the chamber will be formulated during this call and that member participation is crucial. It will help with participation and input if you State in the invitation memo that something is going to *happen* during this call other than listening. There are now technical methods for controlling the calls, with telecommunications vendors able to establish listen-only and queue-for-questions modes if the calls get large and unwieldy. . . You should be so lucky!

The best part about conference calls is that they tend to make your members accountable to each other for action. When someone speaks up publicly on a call about the need to act on an issue, chances are much

higher that they will actually do so themselves.

Another technology-based grassroots tool is the hotline number with recorded message and automated response system. This technique is really effective for a crucial local issue. You can set up a hotline, for instance on an issue like a planned increase in the sales tax rate, or a fight against closing a government-owned facility. In other words, use this kind of action on a short-term fight with a definite deadline. They are also more effective when used on “negative campaigns”, which stop rather than promote governmental action.

Publicize the existence of this special phone number beyond your membership, taking an ad in the paper and/or doing a mailing. People are asked to call the hotline and leave a message for the appropriate senator, governor, etc. A taped greeting is followed by an opportunity for the caller to leave a message on tape. The callers feel fulfilled, your members feel like you’re doing something concrete. And your elected officials get real input from real voters. Win. Win. Win.

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**Why not let someone else fund your grassroots campaigns.**

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There are many telecommunications vendors who will provide this service, but it’s not free. Most likely, you will only be able to engage in this and other pricey, high tech grassroots techniques on issues that have special meaning to your well-heeled groups of allies. In other words, some company, individual or trade group will have to pay for you to have all this fun. In the section of this publication dealing with coalitions, you will see references to all kinds of strange alliances that can be formed.

From time to time, your group may be courted to join an alliance or coalition. When this occurs, it is typically because the group asking for your support is perceived to be *wearing a black hat* by the public. Your role in this situation is to play the *white hat ally*, which means that the group will use your name to sanitize their lobbying efforts. If you agree to such a request, try to get something out of the deep-pocket lobbyists who want your help (read: money) to do the thing right.

Technology resources to help your cause may actually come to you, if you open the door. Computer and office equipment vendors are always looking for ways to differentiate themselves from the competition. Help them, while helping yourself. Ask them to set up demonstration models at your events. Have the samples they produce be actual communications with elected officials on behalf of your members who drop by the booth to learn more about the company. Some chambers have even run rallies at which a group of vendors are brought in to produce letters for everyone who attends the rally. All those who RSVP are urged in advance to bring copies of their letterhead to the rally, although regular white paper works fine.

### ***Doing It For Them***

With all of these techniques and tools aimed at getting your members to take part, the two most important rules are: Make it short, and make it easy. Sometimes, no matter how easy and short you make it, your members who are willing, just aren’t able. They really don’t have the time. For some of them, you just might want to do it for them!

Try this: at the start of each year, ask each of your directors and each member of your government affairs committee, as well as those in your small activist list, for twenty copies of their letterhead and twenty envelopes. Tell them that you’ll use their letterhead to produce correspondence regarding issues already approved for action to representatives. Of course, *none* of these letters will be sent out to *anybody* without

first being sent back to the businessperson for his or her signature. You will be taking on the work of writing the letter, while leaving the member with all of the authority to approve or stop the letters. You produce letters as you need them throughout the year, and deliver them to your member, ready for signature and sending.

### ***Your role when the gun is hired***

If your chamber feels strongly enough about a complicated, technical issue, you may need to find a way to fund the hiring of a professional lobbyist. This decision should not be attempted in a vacuum. The organization still fills a critical action role by providing this lobbying pro with the real company evidence and impact that helps make the case for the needed legislative change. The grassroots also get into play simultaneously with most good campaigns involving professional lobbyists. One expert calls this the “Triangulation System: Lobbyists selling ideas to the folks back home, so the folks back home will convince their elected officials that the lobbyists’ ideas deserve support...”<sup>25</sup>

The efforts of a hired, professional lobbyist will probably be in vain unless you and your members make it clear that the folks back home really care about the issue involved. No matter how good the lobbyist, there must be a constituency for the position of the policy maker and that constituency needs to be identified and vocalized. . . by you!

### ***Advisory***

One last point about grassroots lobbying: Sometimes, you shouldn’t use it. Joel Blackwell spends a good deal of time in his programs making sure that association executives and volunteers recognize that many times, the grassroots method is the least effective means of achieving the desired result. If there is the potential for a group of hotheads within your membership to alienate legislative leaders or the new mayor to the point of hostility and backlash, then you don’t sic the hotheads on these leaders.

You may also need to pick just one or two issues to be handled using grassroots techniques each year, with the balance of your lobbying being done by staff and your activist core. It is definitely possible to burn out your good people. Pick your grassroots fights carefully.

### ***Election politics . . . entering the quagmire***

This is probably the toughest step to take for any chamber. At some point, however, you should think about sticking a toe in the political waters.

“There has for too long been a feeling among issue advocates [You!] that election politics is dirty, and they wouldn’t lower themselves to participate in it. Whether the cause is apathy, naiveté, or misguided idealism, the result is that a legislator never sees [the issues of these people] as ones that could seriously help or hurt his reelection. In his mind, he assigns these issues a lower priority - ones that can safely be neglected.”<sup>26</sup>

This is certainly a good reason to get involved in election politics. You want the priorities of your members to be a priority for your elected leaders. But there is another reason. Legislators are naturally highly sensitive to election activities. They know that almost anything can tip the balance of a close election today, or cause an upset victory by a rival candidate in two years. They know that any issue, including yours, could contribute to victory or defeat.

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<sup>25</sup> E. & E. Wittenberg, “How to Win In Washington,” p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> G. Alderson & E. Sentman, “How You Can Influence Congress,” p. 285.

In other words, any message you deliver during the election cycle, about policies your members want, will be given greater consideration, provided you, and/or your organization, are seen as somehow involved in election politics.

There are a number of small and intermediate steps you can take without plunging in over your head. A little bit can go a long way and you do not need to be fully involved in political campaigns in order to realize benefits from election activity. Your organization should review the options below and find those actions that match the concerns and needs of your members.

- **Interviews & Forums:** The simplest and safest step into elective politics is the creation of candidate forums or interviews. The former involves a group of candidates all in one place, while the latter provides a series of meetings with individual candidates.
- **Candidate Questionnaires:** If you're not ready for in-person interviews, you might start with a printed questionnaire on business issues. This short document is sent to the candidate with simple blanks to be filled in. It must be made clear how the responses will be used. And, you must use them
- **Voter Registration & Awareness:** Democracy is all about constituencies. Unfortunately, small employers have not always been seen as a constituency. Make chamber voices heard at lobbying time by creating a voting block out of private sector employees. The organizations that represent employers should provide voter registration and awareness materials that can increase the understanding of issues and the numbers at the polls.
- **Endorsements:** Endorsing candidates could be a powerful weapon when wielded by an influential, respected organization. Unfortunately, endorsing candidates can, in some circumstances, bring your non-profit tax status into question. There could also be a considerable political price to pay. Think very thoroughly about whether you can pay that price. Or, as the government relations specialist from PepsiCo says, "Will the gain exceed the pain?" And, check with you accountants and lawyers. It is probably best to let a business-related PAC do the endorsing, rather than the chamber.
- **PAC Man?:** As Ronald Reagan once noted: "Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to realize it bears a very close resemblance to the first."<sup>27</sup> Without being too cynical, the reality is that many elected representatives simply scan their contributors' list before meeting. If your legislators are not of this crass variety, appearances at fundraisers increase your visibility and credibility when it comes time to lobby. The token check, no matter how small, can be a part of the relationship-building process mentioned earlier. Perhaps more importantly, your elected representative just wants your PAC's name on his/her list of contributors. Before helping to establish a business-friendly political action committee, be sure you know the legal and tax rules and follow them to the letter because the chamber's reputation will be associated in people's minds with the PAC.
- **Active spectators:** Even if your organization is not ready for a major role, try to follow the ebb and flow of the political tides in your community. Sometimes being an active spectator can almost make us appear to be a player. Knowing who gives to whom, vote counts in various districts and other information makes you involved, even if you can't get your organization actively involved.

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<sup>27</sup> Tony Augrade, "The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations," p. 178.

## Making Your Chamber Make a Difference

Politics directly affects policy development, and you are committed to playing a role in influencing public policy. At the very least, you must be aware of the comings and goings of party politics in your community. You don't have to be partisan or directly involved in campaigns, but you must, at the least, know how political considerations will affect the issue you're working on. At any rate, your role as an information resource for your members should include a working knowledge of who's doing what to whom in your neighborhood political playground.

## CHAPTER 8

### Media Play

#### Reporters & editors are people . . . honest!

In this short chapter, it isn't possible to provide a full course in media relations for chambers of commerce. Instead, we'll focus strictly on the media's relationship to your public affairs efforts. To have an effective government relations program, your organization must take an active role in communicating to and through the media. It is simply a critical, and growing part of the process.

Web communications, 24-hour news coverage and electorates too diverse and/or distant to touch in a personal way, all make the use of media more critical in promoting specific public policy agendas. As previously mentioned in the discussion about grassroots activities, it is as important to get the message *behind* mayors and assembly representatives as it is to get the logic and arguments *in front* of them. The media is critical to that effort.

The average citizen becomes aware that an issue is important or pressing when it makes the morning paper or the evening news. In this regard, government officials are no different from anyone else.<sup>28</sup>

How does an elected official decide whether he must deal with an issue? Probably the same way you would. You would ask yourself whether your constituents care about it, whether it is likely to be an election issue someday and whether you are going to have to answer questions about it. All of these determining factors, and more, are heavily influenced by media coverage.

Media activity is important not only because of its direct impact on government leaders, but also because of its impact on the people (both staff and volunteers) that you have working on issues. News coverage can give people a sense of their own power. Nothing motivates a volunteer or a staff member like seeing their issue covered in the paper. Too often, people involved in public policy work feel like we are hollering in the midst of the forest. We are a tree about to fall and nobody will hear us. Getting coverage keeps our own juices flowing and the volunteers eager.

But the primary reason to get involved is that, increasingly, the battlegrounds on the issues are the news and editorial pages of the papers, the Sunday morning talk shows, web banners and the nightly TV news coverage of carnival-like press events. You simply must fight where the battle is taking place. The *other side* will be scrapping for every inch of news coverage they can secure in the local paper. They will be looking to become the source of truth for reporters. And, they will be using the media as a proactive tool in their fight. How about you?

As has been previously mentioned, the most important thing in selling ideas, whether to political leaders or your board, is to handle the communication in the context of an ongoing relationship. Many of the same principles apply in dealing with the media, as with politicians.

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**The relationship must be two-way: Win-win wins.**

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<sup>28</sup> E. & E. Wittenberg, "How To Win In Washington," p. 19.

Give them some quality time. “Quality time here means treating journalists as fellow professionals with an important job to do and nurturing the relationships informally so that they can stand the test in a crisis.”<sup>29</sup>

First, you need to make the relationship two-way. It’s no good to just push stories and pump reporters and editors for information, without providing value, resources and access to the representatives of the media. Fortunately, in many cases, the information nuggets and services you provide to make them love you are exactly the same things you want to give them anyway, to help spread the gospel according to your chamber.

Reporters and editors benefit from access to gregarious business executives who will agree to have their name appear in print. Getting your members’ names and opinions in print is also part of what you want from the press. *Everybody wins.*

Another example. Quality research, survey results and interesting industry or economic data are things that the media always need. These things provide background for stories and, in some cases, are meaty enough to make their own story. Distributing this data is also your goal. *Everybody wins.*

Reporters and editors need people to call when their deadlines are short and news is breaking late. You will make friends in the media if you “. . . interpret and comment on arcane . . . matters that reporters have to turn into understandable English under deadline pressure.”<sup>30</sup> You want to be the source that people look to for authoritative insights. Once again, *everybody wins.*

Editorial page editors have to try to come up with one or more brilliant idea every day, on which to base their lead editorial. You and your members have great ideas all the time. Share them and *everybody wins.*

Establishing the relationship of trust in which the exchanges mentioned above might occur is the key step. There are four things you need to do:

1. Volunteer. Just call up the editors and tell them you have something they might like to know about. Also tell them that you are always available to provide a quote on a business-related issue and you can usually line up a businessperson as well. Give them your home phone number. Call them up with a scoop. Note: Reporters and editors will often act as if they’ve known what you’re telling them for weeks. Egos in all sectors can be fragile, so if it happens, let it go and congratulate them on their impeccable sources. In fact, you may want to start most of these calls with, “You’ve probably heard this, but just in case you missed it .
2. Give both editors and reporters access to nice events. Reporters always seem to be broke (or at least complaining about the nice perks available in the business world). Even the hard-boiled variety appreciates invitations.
3. Come up with ways to help the paper make a few dollars. Contrary to popular opinion, this is not *whoring* for a story. When it comes to events like Chamber of Commerce Week, Manufacturing Day or Small Business Month, don’t just send over the press release and demand that they print it, come up with a marketing promotion idea that helps them sell some space. Once again, everybody wins.

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Linsky, “Impact, How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking,” p. 209.

<sup>30</sup> E. & E. Wittenberg, *How to Win in Washington*, p. 116.

4. Leak. Once in a while, it might help your cause to leak a little information that they might have trouble getting elsewhere. Use your head in this regard and never abuse a personal trust.

Too many times, there seems to be a combative, or at least defensive edge to relationships between chamber executives and the media. In some ways, it's almost as if chamber people can't understand why editors don't do their jobs for them!

Often, the paper covers news about the chamber as an organization, about the executive officer, about policy decisions, even about finances of the chamber, in ways that are not flattering. A chamber is a highly visible, and hopefully accountable, institution in the community that is bound to attract periodic media attention. If it didn't, you'd be upset, so don't expect that this coverage will always be positive.

Tim White, publisher of the *Times Union* in Albany, has noted that those of us representing business must also remember that those who work in newsrooms are almost universally liberal, by nature and education. This is not an unfair generalization. If you don't believe it . . . ask them! At the same time, chambers of commerce are almost universally conservative, by nature and tradition. Chances are, these two differing points of view are going to come into conflict from time to time.

The way to handle these philosophical differences is with humor and grace, not with rancor and hostility. Self-deprecating jokes can really help break the ice and build lasting bridges . . . "This is the flack for the fat cats calling for the bleeding heart liberal. Is she in?"

When you or the organization are the brunt of a shot in the media, you can react by baring your fangs and promising revenge, which accomplishes exactly nothing, or you can again use humor to diffuse the tension. The reporter picks up the phone when you call after such a story and expects to have a drag-out argument with you. He or she is tense and ready to fight to the finish. Kid them instead.

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**It is *never* wise to pick a fight with someone who  
buys ink by the barrel.**

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Inaccuracies are something else. Whether a story is about you, one of your members, the economy or about an issue you're working on, always call or write to correct real inaccuracies. This helps to solidify you as a source for the media - which is what you want to be.

The helpful corrections should always be phrased to save face for the reporter or editor who screwed up. "You probably had trouble getting through to this source who could have filled you in on this one more detail related to the story." Or, "I often make the mistake saying millions when I mean billions. Happens to me all the time." Whatever. Don't challenge their credentials or abilities, just offer some help. What do you gain by making them feel like a jerk?

### ***Crisis management***

How will you handle things if a legislator or mayor suddenly decides to pick a fight with your organization? What will you say to the media if an issue you have been visible on in the past is suddenly thrust into the limelight?

One chamber executive was unfortunate enough to have an African-American mayor of a mid-size city publicly attack his chairman because of a perceived racial slur. Whether this attack was justified by the words of the chairman or not, the chamber had a public policy media crisis on its hands.

Put a plan in place for dealing with media challenges:

1. Assuming you are there, your first step should be to use your personal network to check on the nature of the story or the accuracy of the news account. “No comment” is not the ideal response to a question from a reporter about a crisis, but you really do need to know first hand before you answer a lot of questions.
2. Tell your entire staff how you want media contact handled if you are not in and not reachable. (Remember the case of the Hawaii story mentioned above!) Script their response precisely - “Ms. Wilson is now in contact with the affected parties and will have a statement later this afternoon . . .” Make sure they don’t try to guess at what the chambers’ response will be.
3. If it is a crisis involving a political leader or major employer, call his or her office. The point here is to get your call to the policy maker on the record, showing that you tried, even if you didn’t get through.
4. Call your executive committee and activist circle to alert them to the fact that you expect to be pressed for a media statement. Tell them that if they have input, they should express it immediately because there won’t be time later. If the committee member you call isn’t in, tell their staff person or spouse that you must speak to the press by XX o’clock, so if there is a way to reach the boss, they must do it by this time. Make sure you have home and car phone numbers for all of your directors.
5. When you actually respond or reach out to the press with your comments, try to keep them short, with the promise of a written follow-up to come. All of us are more precise and clear on paper than we are when ad-libbing at the microphone.
6. If you really think that your best response is “no comment,” try to say it in a way that puts you in the best light. “This issue is too complex to offer a knee jerk reaction for public consumption. We are studying the problem and will have a statement within 48 hours.”
7. Do your best to not pass the buck just because the issue is difficult. It can be tempting to say: “This is primarily an economic development issue. I suggest you call the EDC.” If this is your usual response, you will soon become irrelevant, not only on this crisis, but on other media issues.

Is the chamber the voice for business in your community? Make it so.

### ***Getting in***

On the pro-active side, getting coverage of your issues, positions, media-related tactics (like press conferences), research and resolutions can be a challenge. Assuming that the relationship with the press is already up and running, you still have to sell your ideas.

Is your story idea, event or issue newsworthy? It might be if it:

\_\_\_\_\_ Involves a large number of people (definition varies by issue and medium)

\_\_\_\_\_ Is unusual (boy bites dog, or lamb lies down with lion, is still good reading)

\_\_\_\_\_ Directly affects the readers of the given medium

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\_\_\_\_\_ Involves famous people (The press would cover Britney Spears or any Kennedy getting their drivers' licenses renewed)

\_\_\_\_\_ Is a human-interest story

\_\_\_\_\_ Happens when news is slow

\_\_\_\_\_ Ties into other similar events that have already been deemed "newsworthy"<sup>31</sup>

Try to work your issue, story or press event into one or all of the above categories to provide a better opportunity for coverage.

There are many simple methods of spreading the word to a broader public. Many chambers have worked out arrangements with local newspapers or business papers to carry "Chamber News and Views" sections. Some chambers also have two newsletters - one for the members and one for the general public. If you can set either of these arrangements up, don't use the space exclusively for *soft* information and community promotion. Remember that you are the advocate for the business community . . . so use every media opportunity to advocate.

Be a regular contributor to the *Letters to the Editor* section of your paper. "This is the most widely read section of the newspaper, except for the front page."<sup>32</sup> In addition, the reporters and other editors obviously read this page every day. They are among the top customers for the product you're selling through such letters.

Opinion editorials (op eds) are a slightly more formal and lengthy version of a letter to the editor. Write editorial messages on major issues, when you have the time to think the story through and get help with writing the piece.

Try different media for possible inclusion. Sometimes the opinion of a chamber executive in a nearby community is just what the paper was looking for, as a way to provide balance and objectivity to a *Letters* page debate. And, don't be afraid to *ghost write* these opinion pieces and letters to the editor for your chairman or other active members. The editors may be more receptive seeing a piece from somebody besides that pesky chamber executive and it will provide a good (and free) pat on the back for your members.

Having your chamber mentioned in the newspaper or on the airwaves in connection with a serious public policy concern is the best way to enhance the image of your chamber. This work is self-serving, not philanthropic. Devoting time to it will pay for itself many times over. If you can afford it, you might even want to consider hiring a public relations professional on a short-term basis to help you set up your processes and initiate the first contacts with the media.

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<sup>31</sup> Si Kahn. *Organizing*, p.240.

<sup>32</sup> K. Bobo, et al, *Organizing For Social Change*, p. 120

## CHAPTER 9

### e-advocacy and you

#### Turning zeros and ones into yeas and nays!

Cyber-advocates of all stripes are taking their causes digital. Powered by information technology, single-cause groups are ascendant. No-growthers, environmentalists, unions, champions of a myriad of social issues and many others are advocating online. All it takes to be a virtual advocate are a computer, online access, an email account and passion for an issue. If your chamber is going to remain an effective advocate for business and your community or state, you too need to play a portion of your advocacy game online.

This chapter is a brief primer on how you can use your chamber's website, email lists and other information technology to super-charge your public affairs program. Information technology is just a tool, albeit a powerful one. It's a means to an end, not the end itself. You can get so far into the deep woods of technology that it's easy to lose sight of that simple fact. Above all else, keep your overall organization objectives in mind and how your public affairs program helps you accomplish those objectives.

Public affairs work is about influencing the actions of people so to the extent that technology enhances communications, it's a valuable tool. The job of your chamber is to use information technology to foster and facilitate the communication between your members and their elected reps. If it doesn't accomplish that, you are merely showing off when you use it.

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**Consider the “opportunity costs” of e-advocacy.  
If you're working on this “stuff,” you're not doing other “stuff!”**

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While relatively cheap, information technology has a price including computers, website development and maintenance, as well as data base management. There are also “opportunity costs,” because when you are putting time, money and talent into technology, they are not available for other uses. Online advocacy should be a line item in your annual public affairs budget (see Chapter 11, relating to resources).

#### *Why Not Stick With the Old Way?*

Some of the benefits of an effective online advocacy program include:

- Providing more and timely information that is tailored to targeted audiences, so you can communicate more effectively while lowering your distribution costs.
- Even to the passive observer viewing your website, or receiving an email newsletter from you, it will be evident that the chamber is an advocate for the business community
- Online advocacy can help you identify new people who are interested in public affairs, and help you build a self-sustaining community of grassroots activists
- Online advocacy, especially information on your website, can influence media coverage on any given issue
- Most important of all, online advocacy can mean victory because the right people armed with the right information can be quickly mobilized at the right time to contact the right elected officials.

### *Honest Assessment*

When looking to improve your online advocacy program, a good place to begin is with an audit of your Website. There are firms that specialize in this type of assessment, but for most chambers, asking a few simple questions – honestly – will take you a long way toward determining the potential for online advocacy. In addition to using your staff team, this is a great way to involve some of your members. Have them answer these kinds of questions:

- ❑ Overall, how does the chamber’s website look? Is this a place I really want to spend time? Is it inviting, or do I find it uncomfortable? Is it easy to navigate?
- ❑ Is the information on the site fresh?
- ❑ Has the chamber carefully considered the sensitivity of the public affairs information on the site? Is it making use of a “members-only” section?
- ❑ What is the profile of public affairs on the site’s front page? High? Low? Is that consistent with the way chamber leaders view public affairs?
- ❑ Can I tell what the chamber’ public affairs positions are, based on what I find on the site? Was I able to find that out in summary form quickly? Is the information on the site compatible with the chamber’s printed public policy material?
- ❑ Can I tell whom to contact at the chamber regarding any given issue? Was I given a way to do so (email hyperlink, phone number)?
- ❑ Could I find out who my elected officials are? Was I given a means to contact them?
- ❑ If I do want to contact them about an issue, would I be able to craft a message based on the information available on this site?
- ❑ Is the site interactive so members have a space to exchange thoughts with each other on key issues? With the chamber staff? With outside experts?

Answers to those questions can guide you in improving the relevance and functionality of your website. At a *bare minimum* relative to public affairs your site should display an overview of the chamber’s position on key issues. It should sing your praises on recent lobbying accomplishments (at all levels). It should include a list of public officials, not only to enable members who want to help with grassroots lobbying, but also as a driver for traffic on your general site. People love online directories for all kinds of things, so you might also want to include a directory of key dates relating to starts of sessions, public hearings, elections, etc.

Beyond those basics, your chamber’s website could also include an email matching system that helps members identify their elected officials and a means to quickly contact them (call ACCE for names of good vendors who provide this service for larger, multi-legislator markets).

You could include on-line registration forms to enable members to signup to receive action alerts and other public affairs messages, press releases, white papers, studies and testimony from the chamber. Such a form could also be used to both educate members about committee (task force) activity and encourage their participation on these subgroups.

### *On the links*

Links to other resources are also helpful and the possibilities are almost endless. Don’t overdo it, but you can add a lot of value to members by having some key resource Web links readily available. Consider

including not only the link to legislators and government offices, but also the sites of allied groups and national lobbying information powerhouses, like the US Chamber. There are also great research sites that can help chambers and their members –

National League of Cities ([www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org)), International City/County Managers Association ([www.icma.org](http://www.icma.org)), National Association of Counties ([www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org)), Council of State Governments ([www.statesnews.com](http://www.statesnews.com)) US Senate ([www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)), US House ([www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)), US Government Printing Office ([www.access.gpo.gov](http://www.access.gpo.gov)), Federal Government Resources ([www.ed.gov/EdRes/EdFed/](http://www.ed.gov/EdRes/EdFed/)), Congressional resources (<http://thomas.loc.gov/>), Federal statistics ([www.fedstats.gov](http://www.fedstats.gov))

Your website will be seen by many publics as the embodiment of your chamber. The Web is how many (maybe even most) people interact with you. Consequently, your site should present well and be easy to use. Also, what you say on the site must be consistent with your public pronouncements through the news media, testimony, and print publications. Make sure that the people managing your website and those handling your public affairs program actually talk to each other – a revolutionary concept in some organizations!

**Get those managing your website  
& those handling public affairs  
to talk to each other!**

Your website, in combination with email can be used in a variety of ways to promote your agenda. An online survey can help you identify issues. Online searches can help you learn about issues in a fraction of the time it would take otherwise. You can also easily learn about what the opposition is thinking – a critical need in any lobbying initiative. The web can also help you build coalitions, educate members and, ultimately, actually influence legislation.

### *Issues Identification*

In Chapter 3 we talked about ways to decide what issues your chamber should focus on. The Internet provides both structured and unstructured ways to get member input.

You can use *web-based opinion research* broadly with your membership or selectively with specific industry clusters, interest groups organized around specific topics or issues (like land use, air access, signage, etc.) or specific governance groups like the board or a task force. Depending on your timeframe and objective, you can passively post the survey instrument on your website, or push an embedded link for the survey page out to your entire membership via an email broadcast.

Keep in mind that not all of your small business members are email-enabled yet!

A more passive way of identifying issues is to monitor various **mailing lists** and **bulletin boards**, both your own and those of other groups.

To be more proactive about issues identification you can pose questions to your appropriate online discussion groups. Just like in face-to-face meetings, participants will bring up issues that they see coming or are currently impacting them. The result will be a threaded dialogue over a period of time that can provide some great insights. An advantage of this type of “discussion” is that it is not limited by geography so people can attend from wherever they are. And since it isn’t taking place in “real time,” they can participate when it’s most convenient to them. If you’re dealing with a specific issue (say the so

called “living wage” or “sustainable growth”) you can add topic experts to the mix, people who are extremely knowledgeable on that topic.

### *Issues Research*

The most effective public affairs programs are research-driven. You have to know your issues thoroughly and what is being said about them.

The immediate temptation on issues research is to turn to the Internet. First, however, start with people familiar with the issue and known print material about it. Doing so will facilitate an informed online search. When doing an online search, use at least two different search engines per query, since they are work somewhat differently.

If the issue is local in nature, a search of the online archives of the local newspapers and magazines is a good place to start. Also, government records relative to your issue may be available online, so check the website of your city or county government or other involved government entity. The same process applies for state issues.

Additionally, for state and national issues, check the websites of state and national chambers and relevant trade associations that may be working on the issue. On state and national issues, the website [www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov) can be useful as can the archives for various media outlets (Wall Street Journal, CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, etc.)

Another option is for-fee services like Lexis-Nexis ([www.lexis-nexis.com](http://www.lexis-nexis.com)) or Dialog ([www.dialog.com](http://www.dialog.com)). For most chambers, this option is overkill, but in unique, high-stakes policy battles, you may want to subscribe for the duration of the fight.

### *Issues Management*

Like any other program, project or initiative at your chamber, information technology tools exist to help you manage your issues.

Your membership database software must allow you to store member emails. To make your online advocacy program work, you need to aggressively capture email addresses. At every opportunity, ask for email addresses: on the member application, on event registration and sign-in forms, when you are calling annually to verify member records as a matter of procedure or for the directory. Ask! Make some of your update information available only through online newsletters.

Committee and task force work is much easier to manage online. Meetings will continue in the real world, of course, but they can also take place online through chat rooms. Issues can be discussed in discussion groups. Meeting minutes can be disseminated via email or stored online with members able to link into them. Draft white papers, position statement, press releases and other documents can be worked be distributed via email and worked on by members of the committee.

Sophisticated software systems are available for tracking issues, but they are primarily used by national and state organizations.

### *Coalition Building and Support*

There are times when your chamber will find it beneficial to work through a coalition. Maybe you’re working on a ballot issue regarding growth management or a key transportation initiative. A broader independent public profile, coordination of message and pooling of resources can be accomplished through a coalition.

Whenever you are setting up a multi-organization coalition, it is valuable (and small-p politic) to use a coalition website *with a separate URL*. This site can be useful for dispensing important information to the general public and news media while still having an exclusive portion for use by coalition members. It can also provide necessary “cover,” for any one member of the coalition.

### *Member Education*

Face it. Any of your members who are actually well versed on the legislative and political process are the exception. To most business people, government is unfathomable and unappealing. Anyone with a for-profit mentality has a difficult time understanding (or at least being patient with) the glacial deliberations of government and the Byzantine machinations of bureaucracy. Business people clearly understand that government can impact them profoundly through taxation, legislation and regulation. Less apparent is how to actually influence the decision-making process. You can education them on the ins and outs of government, and the Internet can help you.

Members need help in two ways to be effective advocates: they need background information on the issues; and they need to understand how government works and how to communicate with government officials.

Start by providing basic information on your own website. If you’re a local chamber, under a section called “Legislative Basics,” or “Working with Government,” briefly explain how the city council and county commission make ordinances. If your chamber’s market area includes multiple jurisdictions, you’ll have to be somewhat general to accommodate the variations in their processes. You can include links to the city and county sites where more detailed information is available.

There are some great free online resources available to bolster your member efforts to learn about the legislative process, their elected officials are and how to most effectively contact them. One is a site through the Library of Congress called “Thomas, Legislative Information on the Internet” (<http://thomas.loc.gov/>). Another is a non-partisan advocacy how-to site called SpeakOut ([www.speakout.com](http://www.speakout.com)). An effective way to use such online resources is to put their links on this part of your website. You can also embed the links in your email newsletters.

For those who want to go to a deeper level, there is The People’s University ([www.peoplesuniversity.org](http://www.peoplesuniversity.org)) and “Government & Law” courses at Hungry Minds University ([www.hungrymindsuniversity.com](http://www.hungrymindsuniversity.com)).

### *Issues Advocacy*

So far we’ve talked about identifying and researching issues, using technology to manage the issues process, researching friends and foes, building coalitions, and educating members. All well and good, but ultimately advocacy is about getting people to take action (or not!) on issues, in a way that is favorable to your members.

Your website is a powerful tool for mobilizing people. While the merits of a website as a source of information are obvious, it’s when combined with a call to action that the real potential of online advocacy is realized. When members visit your site, they should be able to read as much or as little about an issue as they want. With their interest thus engage you have the opportunity to get them to act.

Many chamber have “action centers” on their sites. To be effective, access to the “Take Action Center” must be right next to the information about the issue. By clicking a hyperlink or button, members can immediately act on their impulse to do something about the issue. Once into the “Take Action Center” they can find talking points, sample letters, identify which elected officials to contact, and determine how they want to do so (email, fax, letter, telephone).

At that point, the more sophisticated online advocacy programs use email-matching software, which matches a member's zip code to the correct elected official. The member can just click a button or link to send the default message, or they can customize the message. Most of these programs give the member sending options: email, fax or they can print and send a letter. Some will even connect the member by telephone to the elected official's office. "LobbyNet" by *Pinpoint Communications* is one of the better software packages of this type.

A simpler and less expensive alternative is a "Take Action Center" that has talking points and sample letters on the issue and simply lists the contact information for public officials. This could include a hyper-linked email address to elected officials.

Of course, the novelty of receiving email is long gone. People are now so accessible through email that they've become almost numb to it. This is especially true at the national and state levels, but increasingly true at the local level as well. Elected officials (and their staffs) who are bombarded with cookie cutter messages won't react favorably to a mass campaign. A personal, thoughtful message will get more attention every time, regardless of the delivery method.

### *Some Final e-ideas*

So, getting members to your website is your first challenge. Make sure your URL is displayed on all of your print material; promote the site on message boards and during live discussion and, of course, on any links in your own email communications. When you need action, an email broadcast to your members (or a more targeted one to a specific member group, if appropriate) should let them link back to your site, get the information they need on the issue, and contact information.

Information technology can move your public affairs program to the next level of effectiveness. Technology used well and kept in the proper perspective can be a great means to connect your members with their elected representatives, while making you and your organization appear smarter and more aggressive.

## CHAPTER 10

### Measurements

#### How do you and your board evaluate progress?

It can be very tempting to view success in public affairs in terms of attendance. If people come, they care and you're doing the right thing. If they don't, you're screwing up. In the government affairs area, however, attendance can be a very inaccurate meter of success. In fact, less can mean more. A meeting involving an elected official and five or six people who really care about an issue can be more valuable to the organization as a whole, and to the government official involved, than a speech in front of 300.

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**Small is not a problem.**

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In the beginning, or when your program is being reinvented, it can be a good idea to deliberately aim small. Make the programs and activities good, not necessarily big. Make the letter writing campaigns and visits with political figures personal and effective, not necessarily voluminous. Your natural assumption that most chambers have larger attendance and involvement for government relations activities is probably wrong. A few good men and women tend to dominate these activities in every employer organization.

The same is true of volunteer numbers on your activist list, witnesses lined up to give testimony and other forms of involvement. Your effort does not need to be big to be good. Keep your members who do attend and take part focused on this fact. Just as you might get discouraged because so few people are involved, they will too. Never express public disappointment with a turnout, if there are enough people involved to get something (anything) done. Put anyone who attends to work, or give them a good round table discussion, or whatever..., no matter how few are there! After the event, if you want to work behind the scenes to improve attendance, that's fine.

One larger metro chamber ran a series of issue forums for non-members in more distant reaches of their territory. The purpose was to increase awareness and, hopefully action in the exurbs. Most of these thinly-disguised membership development events drew 20-30 people and secured three or four new members for the organization. One site had only five companies in attendance, but four of them ended up joining the chamber. Now that was measurable impact from a small event.

#### *Definable & measurable objectives*

How do you know if any of this is doing any good? The first thing to realize is that you must measure your success, not the legislature's. Your members want you to do battle . winning is a bonus!

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**Your members want you to do battle . . .  
. . . winning is a bonus.**

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You're not the legislature and you're not responsible for them being misguided. Your job is not to create or vote on legislation. Your job is to try to influence policy - which is a process. Set your objectives based on improving your process. One of the best ways to do this is to publicize the steps you're going to take in the coming months or years:

“Here’s our plan: Steps 1, 2 and 3.”

Then you tell the board and the world how you did:

“We knocked off 1 and 2 this year. We’re behind a bit on #3, but now the stage is set to get that one done too.

If you’re looking for real, objective goals, what would they look like?

- We’re going to increase from x6 to 10 the number of people who attend Small Business Day at the state capitol.
- We’re going to devote an average of 10 extra inches of policy-related information in our newsletter each month.
- We’re going to make sure that every county legislator knows at least five of our members on a first name basis.
- We’re going to get small private meetings with five more public officials in the coming year than we met with last year.
- We’re going reduce the turnaround time on time-sensitive issues by 24 hours.

If you do the work toward these and other measurable goals, you must have confidence that you will eventually begin to see some legislative results that help your members. By setting objectives based on the *work* as opposed to the *outcome*, you have something real to measure.

Your job is to raise the issue successfully, make it absolutely clear what the business position is, make sure every important government decision maker knows that position, and take the steps you can to keep the issue moving in your direction. Before worrying about whether the legislature does its job, make sure you do yours!

### ***You and me against the world***

You should not measure your effectiveness against that of other organizations. Somebody, maybe even everybody, will always be seen as doing it better. You should measure your own improvement. If you used to do five, do eight. If you used to write nine, write fifteen. If it used to take you two days, do it in one.

This is not to say that benchmarking against other groups doesn’t have its place. Even here, though, measure improvement rather than lining yourself up beside some unachievable model. Pick out a group you think of as effective and look at the *things* they do right - the processes they do well. Decide which of those activities or ideas could work in your organization and scale them to fit your circumstances. Then strive to achieve them -not to end up looking like the other group, but to be more effective in your own right.

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**Bring in a peer to evaluate and advise.**

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At the same time, it can be very helpful to have a peer from outside the chamber come in to evaluate your

public policy program. Peer evaluation can be a real eye-opener. Sometimes it can be awkward to contact that big neighboring chamber, or it can seem intrusive to hit the state chamber for assistance. If you want someone from another region, or state to make it easier for you to handle the criticism and praise, call your state executives' association for a referral. The state associations now have a national network set up, called SEAN, or call ACCE to connect to its Government Relations Special Interest Group (SIG). These groups can link you with similar size chamber executives in other states who might be willing to give you formal or informal advice.

### ***If you sell it, you'll do it***

Another critical measurement tool involves your sales efforts. Build your public policy efforts on behalf of members into your sales materials. If you sell it, you'll do it. This process is fairly simple. Just include a paragraph on your sales flyers touting the advocacy work of the chamber. Tell your prospects all about the plans you have for specific public affairs activity each year. When it comes time to renew members, you want to be able to say you did what you kept your public affairs promises.

The best measurement tools you have are retention and sales tools. Find a way to use these to help you measure the effectiveness of your government relations program. If you use exit polling of resignations, ask a question related to the quitter's perception of your public policy efforts. Test a sales pitch on a long shot prospect that is based totally on advocacy work and see if it works better than your traditional chamber membership presentation.

In general, if you want to find out if your efforts are working, you can probably use information you are already gathering in some other form. For instance, check attendance and involvement records from previous public affairs events and activities. Match these up against your retention records and see if there are correlations.

### ***Real accountability . . . ouch!***

Likewise, build your public policy measurements into your own employment and compensation review process and into the program of work that you share with your directors each year. Make it public that you are planning to do something . . . and you'll probably do it. If this is already in your performance review and program of work, make it more ambitious each year. Once again, at first you can measure the processes, not necessarily the outcomes. Later, if your organization becomes a player, you'll also have plenty of tangible success stories to point to at evaluation time.

Finally, you can evaluate your success by asking the customer. . . then ask them again and again. The idea here is to meet and exceed the desires and requirements of the customer. The only way to know if you're doing that is to ask them. The problem with asking questions of the customer is that they tend to answer. You may be told that you need to do more. You may be told that the hard work you did last year wasn't really noticed. You may find out that your priority issues don't really matter to your members. Can you deal with this? Real improvement in your processes, as well as increased buy-in by your membership, can only come through this kind of honest internal evaluation of your performance. So ask.

## CHAPTER 11

### Ways & Means

#### Human and Capital Resources

The response of many chamber executives to the information and ideas in the preceding chapters is resignation. While they might think the ideas are worthy and exciting, they are resigned to write them off as unattainable. “Where will I find the time and money to do any of those things?”

Chamber executives wear so many hats and have so many conflicting demands on their time that it is hard for them to even imagine investing a larger portion of their day on any single activity. Dues dollars and other income seem stretched like never before and the money just doesn’t seem to be there to take care of the things we must do, much less the things we want to do.

There’s no denying that you will eventually have to devote some additional time and money to your public affairs program if it is going to truly make a difference for your community and your members. At the same time, you may also find it possible to use existing programs and current activities in ways that simply bring government relations more prominently into the regular flow of your chamber’s current life.

For instance, it isn’t necessary to edit and publish a new newsletter for your members on public policy topics. You are spending time researching, editing and writing now, so just devote more of the newsletter to public affairs topics and you’ve achieved a major objective without adding to your workload.

The same is true of programs and events. You’re going to run these anyway, so adjust the focus of your program calendar to more governmental topics and you build your public policy program without adding staff or spending additional money.

Making member relations calls to ensure retention are a must. If those visits include recruiting a potential activist for your grassroots work, you will further cement relationships with your members while achieving a primary objective of your government relations effort.

Eventually, as you’re doing more and asking for more from members and staff, the situation will arise when you’ll have to tell your board of directors you need more – more help and more money. You may find that you need more resources and people to do the job they are asking you to do. At that point, your board will have to make some decisions. Negotiations of this kind can be difficult and sensitive. Whenever practical, the requests should be for incremental, rather than monumental changes.

Another tactic you might need to employ is the use of special assessments for specific projects. If you have a major public policy initiative in a given year, you will need additional resources, but for a limited time. Let’s say your city is going through a onetime charter revision and the chamber’s activity levels and resource needs will be significantly greater than in a “normal” year. Don’t try to handle this within your existing budget. Go to the board and request approval to solicit the members for an additional assessment to fund a specific set of activities, which are above and beyond normal chamber activities. With a little luck and some measurable successes under your belt, these assessments can become more routine, perhaps every other year.

#### ***Big members sometimes need to come up big***

Your large member companies will appreciate the chamber’s increased activity level in public affairs

more than most of your smaller members. The large and mid-size companies also have to come through with added resources for expansion of these processes. Sometimes, they will want to provide in-kind or scholarship support, rather than altering dues schedules. Take it any way you can get it!

One mid-size chamber finds it impossible to fit the expenses for the annual state chamber's legislative planning session into its regular budget. Still, the chamber executive is convinced of the event's importance. He has latched onto one of the larger company's lobbyists who attends the event every year. That lobbyist simply brings the chamber executive along for this trip, providing the equivalent of a scholarship to the event. This also gives both parties an invaluable opportunity for discussion on the way to and from the two-day meeting. And, of course, it saves \$600 on the operating budget side, which can be used for other pressing expenses.

It often seems like smaller chambers are always at least one generation behind in terms of office technology. Computer hardware and software, as well as fax machines and other office equipment, are vital to activities in the public policy arena. Let your more technologically sophisticated members know that you need increased communications information technology in order to advance *their* interests before local, state and federal officials. Tell them that their in-kind contributions of equipment can help.

When you are ready to bring an intern on board, try to get companies to fund the position. This is the kind of business-education activity that most American companies profess to support, so ask them to back up that support with a few dollars above and beyond their regular dues investment. You should be able to fund the relatively modest cost of an intern off-budget, with just a bit of company support.

There is real non-dues revenue opportunity in the public affairs area. One urban chamber publishes a directory (graphically laid out like a map) of elected and appointed officials in the region. This is distributed to members and is sponsored by a company that is conscious of the need for the chamber to be involved in this kind of work. The piece also has a few ads on it, just like your tourism maps.

### ***Programs as government affairs products***

Retired and prospective national political figures, as well as political commentators can draw extremely well for major dinners and luncheon events. There is often a risk with these programs, however, because the celebrities demand significant fees. Try to get one or more of your members to assume the risk of shortfall for you, to enable you to take a chance on one of these programs. Worst case is usually that the event falls slightly short of projected break-even point so the company isn't really risking the whole \$10,000 you have promised to the ex-politician or pundit. These kinds of events provide very visible evidence of the chamber's involvement in the public policy arena. Work out a VIP event in advance of the main show that enables you to make even more money off the event.

Whenever you organize a program that involves transportation and other services to members who are taking part in a lobbying day or fly-in, always build in a cushion to allow you to at least make enough to cover your own involvement. Some chambers, notably the New Jersey State Chamber, go well beyond this minimum mark-up, using an event like this as the major fundraiser for the year.

Another chamber conducts a "roast" of a local/regional politician whenever the situation presents itself (retirement, 80 years in the mayor's office, whatever). The secret here is to make sure that the chamber keeps all, or a substantial portion, of the money, rather than forking it over to somebody's re-election war chest.

There is really no end to the possibilities. Just be creative and willing to take a risk or two (hopefully minimized by corporate fail-safe support) on these activities.

## ***Phase One***

If your organization is currently operating with little or no government relations activity (beyond what you lend to other groups working on crisis issues), it might be helpful to think about the first step - the first investment. How much will the organization need to invest, or re-allocate, in order to make the chamber make a difference in the realm of government relations?

Obviously, every community, political situation and volunteer commitment level is different, but experience at many chambers points the way for organizations planning their first real investment in public affairs. Before you examine the list below, keep in mind that you, your board and your membership can implement many of the programs and ideas described in previous chapters with *little or no* financial investment. Just by shifting emphasis and paying attention to issues you may have previously ignored, you can begin to play a key role in the public affairs process. Even when you're ready to make an organizational commitment of dollars and hours, the investment can, and should, be modest.

If you can pull it off, here's what you should be aiming for in the first phase of your program. Adjust these dollar figures to match your cost of living and pay scales.

### **Staffing:**

- About 15 percent of the chief executive's time should be devoted to government affairs work. Much of that effort will be expended in coordinating the work of others (both staff and volunteers), as well as "delivering" the messages crafted by others. Take the cost of your salary and benefit package and multiply by 15 percent (.15).
- One staff person should be directed to spend 30-50 percent of his/her time on government relations. This position should be above the clerical/support level, but shouldn't be a high-priced, government affairs professional. The job is mostly behind the scenes, with the CEO expected to handle the "face" work with various publics. Take the total salary and benefit cost of your highest paid clerical person and multiply it by 40 percent (.40).
- Clerical support for the process should run 10-20 percent of one secretary's time. Once again, multiply costs for a reception/support staff person and multiply it by 15 percent (.15).

### **Materials:**

- Add about ten percent to your annual printing, photocopying, faxing, phone and postage budget.
- You may have to buy some publications of different kinds. Add \$500, but don't let this amount creep up. \$500 is enough!

### **Travel & Entertainment:**

- You should budget for two trips to the state capital. It's hard to estimate the cost because distances vary so dramatically. One or more of these trips may be covered through reservation fees charged to the volunteers who are accompanying you on the trip. Budget for two room nights, two round trips, food and incidentals.
- Local travel and mileage, for county legislature meetings, town board hearings, fundraisers, etc. shouldn't amount to too much cash.
- Planning session luncheons, meals with elected officials, your share of the cocktails, after city council meetings, etc., should run less than \$50 per month.

- Attendance at political fundraising functions is considered a contribution, which presents problems for most chambers that do not have political action committees to funnel cash into the coffers of friendly politicians. In the beginning, don't budget anything for this amount. It's too expensive and risky for a fledgling "player" and there are other effective ways to be involved in elective politics

**Other expenses:**

- Advocacy advertising may be required from time to time. Cooperative ads on key issues are sometimes organized by state chambers and you may want to run an ad of your own on a sticky local issue that requires citizen involvement. For the most part, volunteers with a stake in the issue should be "tapped" for a few extra dollars when these circumstances arise. Don't budget anything when you're starting out, but try to build some flexibility into your budget, in case you need to contribute to one of these campaigns.
- Memberships in various organizations are essential, both for support and information. The state chamber, state chamber executive's association, ACCE's government relations SIG and the U.S. Chamber's Federation program are a few examples. Do not skip these. Budget for them, even if it hurts.

Expenses described here total less than \$35,000 (in 2000 dollars). This is a sizeable, yet attainable figure (perhaps over time) for most chambers. If you do this much, you will have a fully-functional government affairs operation, but you don't need to spend it all at once. You should walk before you run. You can reduce the "hit" by shifting resources from other places. And, most importantly, this will be an investment that will pay for itself relatively quickly with increased investments in dues and non-dues revenue, as described below.

***Interns: The untapped resource***

A good intern from a history, government or public administration program at a nearby college can sometimes be the basis on which you build your government relations program. An intern can do some of the basic work related to establishing or growing your program that you know you'll never do yourself. He can establish the e-mail 'tree' and make sure something is actually broadcast to the group on a regular basis. She can do the research on your legislators, enabling you to begin establishing a stronger relationship. He can do field interviews with your members to find out what public policies are really driving them crazy. She can arrange the details surrounding candidate debates and other election season programs.

An intern can allow the chamber to have a presence virtually everywhere, without destroying the president's home life any more than is already necessary in chamber work. Tomorrow, that same intern might go on to scheduling state and national government guests for regular chamber breakfasts. And the day after tomorrow, she finds herself the manager of government relations for the chamber, a post which may not even have existed in the past, but which members eventually find indispensable, after seeing what great work could be accomplished.

Even if the intern is a short-timer with your organization, this relationship will pay off down the road. The intern may end up on the mayor's staff, working the public affairs office of one of your member companies, or writing political stories for the local paper.

In addition to all that, the chamber's relationship with the college or university will be enhanced forever. When you need a marketing class to help you with a survey or volunteers to help staff a big event, you

will have an office at the college that will remember your mentor relationship with their students. In one way or the other, hiring an intern should pay off in the long-term as well as the short term. So hire one!

### ***Government affairs as the core product***

If it hasn't been in the past, public affairs involvement is now going to be a key part of the product mix offered by your chamber. If your organization is already active, you will begin to expand the scope of that activity, which will, in turn, make your members feel more confident about investing in the organization. Most chambers report that once they make a move forward in the public affairs area, they can never go back. Their members of all sizes like what they're given and want more of it. And, importantly, they are willing to pay for it.

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**You can make more money and sell more members if your government relations program is**

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Your added visibility in the government relations area will help you sell and retain more members. It may take a while, and you will have to earn a reputation that people are willing to pay for, but every chamber that increases its involvement in these areas enhances its ability to attract and maintain dues dollars. Honest!

Your members may want you to build up non-dues revenue through ever-more entrepreneurial activities, but these ventures seldom build loyalty or added investment in the organization. When the bulk purchasing program is gone, or matched by some other association or vendor, the member who was taking advantage of that program is gone too. On the other hand, if you build your core product - the protection of the interests of business - each membership will be a commitment to, and endorsement of, the organization itself. This certainly doesn't mean that you walk away from all of the valuable services and products you offer your members. It just means that you must keep the main thing the main thing!

### ***Rules rule***

With recent changes in Internal Revenue Service rules related to lobbying by chambers of commerce and associations, as well as increased scrutiny of election, lobbying and campaign practices in many states, chambers may be confused about what they are permitted to do in political and legislative arenas. In general, you have a constitutional right to express your opinions and those of your members on any issue, provided you don't slander people, espouse hatred or discrimination against a specific group, or recommend the overthrow of duly elected governments. In some cases, you must report some of your activities to the right offices at prescribed times.

A chamber of commerce or a chamber executive may legally espouse the benefits of a particular bill/policy and otherwise air opinions. You may also publicize voting records and reprint any documents or records in the public domain, even if they make an elected official look bad. You may state your position on bills, regulations, laws and failed policies. Neither Washington nor any state has passed laws prohibiting you from doing any of these things.

*Just because you have the right to do these things does not mean you should.* As noted elsewhere, some political and legislative action by the chamber may involve too much political pain to make them worthwhile and, of course, executives must be accountable to their boards and members. Chapters Two and Three spell out steps you can take to determine the comfort level of your organization.

Don't let bureaucratic rules keep you and your organization from trying to influence the shaping and making of policy, but think long and hard before getting actively involved in endorsements or contributions to candidates for office. In general, these activities are better left to business-friendly PACs.

## ***Reporting***

On the federal level, the IRS rules related to lobbying deductibility leave most small and mid-size chambers with plenty of room to maneuver. Most chambers have either maintained or enhanced their government relations activity since the imposition of the law, without any significant negative implications (tax or membership) for their organizations or members. For many chambers, the amount of activity qualifying as reportable lobbying will be small enough (less than \$2,000 per year) to avoid any mandatory reporting, even if you enhance your government relations involvement in the future. Even state chambers of commerce, with large lobbying staffs and hired guns carrying the chamber message to the legislature, report modest percentages of their time on lobbying (between 10 and 30 percent).

Lobbying and lobbying communication are both covered under the IRS rules. Much of the work you do to inform your members about issues is not considered lobbying for tax purposes. And, lobbying at the local level is exempt from these federal rules. The time spent by any staff person, including support and research personnel, must be calculated and reported to the IRS.

If your organization does have measurable, reportable lobbying activity, you must tell your members that "X" percent of their dues is non-deductible as a business expense. A statement like the following does the trick:

"Dues to (chamber name) are not deductible as a charitable contribution but may be deductible as an ordinary and necessary business expense. A portion of dues, however, is not deductible to the extent that (chamber name) engages in state and federal lobbying. The non-deductible portion of dues for (year) is (?) percent."

In terms of marketing, the notification mandate is not a bad thing. There have been no chambers in the country indicating that the reporting requirement has hurt membership recruitment or retention. Some professional lobbying firms are actually suspected of exaggerating this reportable figure, or at least deliberately including every possible qualifying expense, to enable their clients to see how much the organization is doing for them in the legislative arena. You don't have to go this far, but don't be bashful about your real lobbying expenses out of fear that your members will rebel against a large nondeductible percentage. It is highly unlikely that members will react in this way.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Chamber of Commerce Executives, the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Society of Association Executives all have guides for IRS rules. These will both answer your questions and ease your tension about tax risks.

Rules vary at the state level, but most states require lobbyists to register with the lobbying commission, government ethics agency, board of elections or another formal bureaucracy. For the kind of legislative activity undertaken by most chamber of commerce executives, this step is usually not required, but a simple telephone discussion with the head of the responsible agency will clarify the rules. Your state chamber of commerce should also be able to help you with this information. What is the worst thing that can happen on the state level? You may have to register and report specific activity quarterly or monthly to the lobbying commission, board of elections or other agency. Again, in terms of marketing and the perception of your organization's role in the process, such registration is not necessarily a bad thing. For an organization like yours, it is more a formality than a burden.

### ***Contributions & gifts***

Contributions are a whole different ball game. If your organization is going to give money to candidates, or if you are going to form a political action committee to undertake such contributions, have a lawyer check it out.

The same is true concerning state rules regarding gifts to government speakers at your events, free accommodations for public sector guests at your conferences, tickets to special events, rides for officials on your members' planes and other in-kind support for guests. Check out the rules and make it clear to political figures that you and your members are going to live by them.

One chamber got itself in hot water by paying for a flight home from Florida, to a northern city, for a county legislator whose vote was critical on a major development project. Chambers in cities with big league sports franchises must be especially careful of the gift rules when handing out seats to the sky boxes and other perks. Other groups get in trouble when hosting major national events, such as conventions or sporting events. Hollywood and government celebrities get all mixed together in the overall hospitality and promotion of the community. Pay attention to the guest list and the rules that apply to your state.

### ***An excuse, not a reason***

There may be some very good reasons that your organization could choose to avoid involvement in government relations and lobbying activity. One reason that just doesn't cut it is worry about reporting rules. Because of your highly public position in the community, you need to follow the rules, but the rules should not discourage you. They are in place to stop abusive activity, which you have no intention of engaging in. You have a right and an obligation to speak up and represent your members on issues that affect them. Don't avoid that obligation because of mistaken ideas about what you can and can't do under lobbying reporting rules.

## Conclusion

### Six Thoughts to Take With You

You care. You care about your community, county and region. Both personally and institutionally, you are concerned about jobs, families and futures. Chamber management is made for people who care deeply about these things. Others need not apply.

Because of your concern, you want to make things better. Corny as it may sound, the chamber of commerce is the *guardian of prosperity* through its efforts to protect the interests of employers - who in turn provide the wealth of every community and region. If your economy is strong, you want to work to secure and build upon that strength, creating an engine that may even be able to pull a larger region or state into prosperity. If the businesses and economy in your region are suffering through sluggish years, you want to create a renaissance that will enable the next generation to grow and prosper around you. To achieve these objectives, involvement in the public policy arena is unavoidable. Policy shapes the economy.

One good story about the connection between policy and the economy has Frank Perdue visiting the Pope. Frank says: “Your Holiness, I’m prepared to give the Church \$25 million.” The Pope says, “That’s wonderful, my son. What can the church do for you?” Frank says, “Not much, sir. I just want you to change the Lord’s Prayer, from ‘give us this day our daily bread, to give us this day our daily chicken.’” The Pope is aghast! He exclaims: “There’s no way. This prayer has been handed down from Jesus Himself through the millennium. Absolutely not!” Perdue looks him right in the eye and says: “\$100 million.” The Pope rolls his eyes and says he must check out an offer this significant with his College of Cardinals. He calls the Red Cloaks and other church officials to gather in Rome. The Pope pushes open St. Peter’s huge oak doors, walks to the podium and says: “Gentlemen. .. kiss the Pepperidge Farm account goodbye.”

Indeed, policy and the economy are intimately linked. Whether it’s a sign ordinance or a sewer project, a Federal tax policy or neighborhood parking rules, government decisions affect business decisions and economic activity. Rather than dreading, postponing or minimizing your immersion into government affairs, embrace the move and grow your role. Experiment and have fun with it. It has the potential to be the most exciting and rewarding aspect of your chamber’s work.

Employer groups all struggle with questions surrounding the *how* and *how much* of government affairs work. As mentioned in the introduction, there is no right or wrong way to address the public policy/government relations function of a chamber. The right way is the way that fits your organization. *The only wrong way is to skip it.* Not one organization is doing all of the things mentioned in this guide, but virtually all of the ideas it contains come from real circumstances and real organizations. Some of them will fit your chamber.

If nothing else, you should carry six things away after reading this guide:

1. The function must be viewed as integral to the work of the organization. It should be a part of everything, from communications, to programming, to personnel evaluations. It is, very literally, the definition of chamber of commerce.
2. Bigger isn’t necessarily better in government relations. Time after **time**, **the** examples in this publication detail the effectiveness of tight, well-run programs. The right size is the size that works, not the one that appears largest.

## Making Your Chamber Make a Difference

3. Activists should be nurtured and utilized. Hug them. Help them. Empower them as much as you possibly can within the comfort levels people are willing to give of themselves and they deserve moral support and structural encouragement of the organization and it's executive.
4. Relationship building affects every aspect of the process. Whether dealing with the media, legislators, mayors, staffs or your own board of directors, relationships will largely determine the success of public affairs operations.
5. Make it easy for your volunteers by investing your own time. Time is the primary medium of exchange. It is what you have to give and take. You're already filling up your days and weeks to the brink, so how do you come up with the time you need to get these things done? There are answers throughout the publication, but the short answer is: This work is more important than all that other stuff you're working on. Put this first.
6. While this work can be exciting and fulfilling, you're not doing it for the fun of it. The enhancement of your public affairs effort is being undertaken to improve your chamber and accomplish its mission.

***Go get 'em!***

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