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Effective Proactive Advocacy

Advocacy is any **action taken to influence public policy**. It can take many different forms, but the end goal is always to **persuade lawmakers to take actions that are beneficial** to your group or organization. Letter writing, phone calls, in-person visits, media relations, public awareness campaigns, giving public testimony, conducting and sharing research, and lobbying are all forms of political advocacy.

The key to successful advocacy is the **ability to effectively communicate with lawmakers**, and to be seen by lawmakers as a **trustworthy source of credible information**. After all, who knows more about your industry than you and your colleagues in the Sports Turf Managers Association? No one can speak with more authority about the business of your industry than you, and you don't want someone outside of your industry defining your issues or setting the public policy agenda that impacts your profession.

Successful advocacy is **proactive in nature**, and starts with strategic planning and goal setting for the organization. Advocacy efforts at all levels of government—local, state and federal, both legislative and regulatory, should be well thought out.

Components of Advocacy

- Issue identification and prioritization
- Adoption of positions
- Issue monitoring and reporting
- Member training and awareness
- Communication and media relations
- Relationship building/lawmaker education
- Information and research
- Taking action

Issue identification and prioritization
What issues are most important to your profession and industry? What government actions have the most impact on your ability to manage your facility? Identification of these issues is the first step in developing a comprehensive advocacy plan. Many organizations begin this process by conducting a member needs survey which asks members to identify the issues that are most important to them or have the most impact on their day-to-day lives. Not only does this allow all association members to play a role in the group's advocacy efforts, it also ensures the organization collects information and feedback from a broad audience of members, not just those who are most interested in public policy issues. (See *Identifying Advocacy Priorities*)

Adoption of Positions
Once issues have been identified, the organization should determine its official position on each issue. Where does the association stand? What does it want to have happen in regards to the issue? What statements does it want to make to members, lawmakers and the public regarding the issue? These position statements will guide the association's efforts for each issue and help determine resource allocation. (See *Identifying Advocacy Priorities*)

Issue monitoring and reporting
Monitoring issues as they move through the governmental process is very important. There are numerous opportunities to influence the issues as they develop. Reporting on the issues to members is also important. Information sharing keeps members informed of how the issues are developing, and more importantly, how the association is taking action.

Member training and awareness

An informed membership trained to advocate on behalf of its profession and association is a powerful advocacy tool. Your members have a tremendous amount of power with their elected officials. In fact, if you ask any lawmaker at any level of government what most influences voting decisions, the answer most often given will be *information and communication from constituents*. Equipping your members to effectively communicate with lawmakers to tell your industry's story will go a long way towards achieving your advocacy goals.

One way to involve your members in proactive advocacy efforts is to develop a key contacts program. This is a network of members who are willing to take action quickly when called upon to contact lawmakers about an issue. These members also work to build personal relationships with their lawmakers, and stay apprised of advocacy issues through association publications and monitoring of current events.

Communication and media relations

Influencing public opinion is another powerful advocacy tool. The media can be one of your greatest allies if you work to cultivate relationships and position your organization as a helpful, responsive, credible source of information. Just as you will work to build relationships with lawmakers, work to build media relationships. Press releases, letters to the editor, inviting media to association events, and engaging through social media are just some of the ways you can build these relationships.

Building relationships with lawmakers

Nowhere is the adage "what you know isn't as important as who you know" more true than in the world of advocacy, and the relationships you and your association build with lawmakers will be crucial to your success. The time to start building relationships is right now. It's much easier to ask someone for something if you have an existing relationship. If you wait until you need something, it will likely be too late, or you will waste valuable time by having to first familiarize lawmakers with your industry and its issues.

The good news is that it's actually fairly easy to build relationships with lawmakers. After all, they're elected or appointed to serve their constituents, and that's you! To start the process, take an inventory of lawmakers you and your association members already know. Then identify the lawmakers you should know—those who represent you directly, and those who hold leadership positions in committees and agencies that impact your issues. Then answer the following questions: Do the lawmakers we want to influence know who we are and what we do? What do they know about our industry? What *should* they know about our industry?

It may be easier than you think to get to know your lawmakers.

An advantage for sports turf managers is that most lawmakers have probably visited a sports facility, either as a player or a fan, or as a student, parent or family member at a school. It's also likely that most, if not all, lawmakers have at least one facility within their districts.

This familiarity can be a great place to start. Use it to your advantage to begin building relationships.

Some other groups you can target for relationship building include green industry alliances and coalitions, environmental groups, community groups, and any other entities that have shared interests or can be of use to you in your advocacy efforts.

Information and research

Your industry and association has information that will help lawmakers as they craft public policy. Data and information from research and reports should be shared with lawmakers, and many times lawmakers are looking for this type of information but may not know where to find it. You can help by proactively providing the information directly to lawmakers. But remember, lawmakers are busy and don't have time to read reams of paper and data. Distill your information into easily consumable formats that can be read quickly. You will gain a reputation as a dependable source of information—especially if your information gets to the point.

Statistics and facts should always be defendable and verifiable. The best way to build trust with lawmakers is for your group to be seen as a reliable source of information. A quick way to damage that trust, or, lose it altogether is to give a lawmaker information that will not stand up under examination.

Taking action

Advocacy efforts are often a marathon, not a sprint, so be patient and don't expect immediate results every time. A grassroots campaign launched to get a piece of legislation passed could be successful within a legislative session, or it could take several years to get it through.

Build your grassroots network and train your members so they are comfortable taking action on advocacy issues. Communicate your advocacy goals and positions with lawmakers and continue to build relationships so that when the time comes for you to take action, you'll have the greatest chance of being successful in your efforts.

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Identifying Advocacy Priorities

The first step for a successful advocacy effort is to identify and define your organization's priorities. Create a document that outlines the priorities and states your association's official position on each issue. These documents are called many things, including a "legislative and regulatory agenda", "advocacy priorities", or a "priority issues agenda." Your document should capture the advocacy issues most important to your members and their facilities, the profession and the industry as a whole, and serve as a guide on where your association will focus the bulk of its efforts and resources in terms of advocacy.

Identify the issues
Your association's first step is to reach consensus on issues of concern. Which issues are most important? Which have the most impact on facility operations? A member needs survey can be conducted to gather feedback. Analysis of industry trends, and information from allied organizations and industry partners should also be considered.

Define the issue
What is the scope of the issue? How are members impacted? What is the status of the issue among lawmakers? What is the current impact, and, how will it impact the industry in the future? What is it about the issues that make them so important to your organization? Factually define the issues within the context of your industry.

Create a position statement for each issue
Position statements are established collaboratively, usually by a committee or group of members working on behalf of the larger group, and ultimately approved by your board of directors, or adopted by your members. These positions are the official stance of your organization, and serve as the basis for any statements made on behalf of STMA to lawmakers, the media, industry stakeholders, your members and the general public. Use industry data, credible science and university research to support your positions and to determine what is reasonable from a public policy standpoint.

Develop a plan of action for each issue
For each issue, determine a plan for how it will be addressed by your organization. Some will require proactive advocacy, and some can be reactive. Are there some issues you will merely monitor, and others that will require direct action? Are there groups with whom you will collaborate? Is a grassroots advocacy campaign needed?

Establish priorities
Once the issues have been identified and defined, they should be prioritized. Not all issues will be equally important. Some will require more time, attention and resources than others. Establish a process for prioritizing issues based on member needs and association resources. Communicate the priorities to members so that they know where the association is focusing its efforts.

Communicating with Lawmakers—Phone calls, letters and emails

Local government
Contact information for local officials can be found on your local government's website. Information can also be found at Local Officials by entering your zip code.

State government
To identify your state legislatures go to Lawmakers by State and enter your zip code. To find comprehensive contact information for all state lawmakers, the National Conference of State Legislatures provides this link State Legislative Websites which can be used to find information for all 50 states, both legislative and regulatory.

Federal government
To identify your members of Congress go to the U.S. House of Representatives website and enter your zip code, or the U.S. Senate website and choose your state. These sites provide comprehensive contact information.

Lawmaker Contact Info

U.S. Senators

U.S. Representatives

State Lawmakers

Mayors

Local Officials

You can also contact your city or county government, or school board to get additional information on local officials.

Calling lawmakers
When you reach your lawmaker's office identify yourself and explain the reason for your call. If you're calling a member of Congress, you should ask to speak with the staff member in charge of the issue about which you are calling.

To call your member of Congress you can dial the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask for the office you need. Ask to speak with the staff member in charge of the issue about which you are calling. Tell the staff member who you are and let them know if you are a constituent. If you don't want to speak in depth with the staff member, you can simply say ask that they pass on your message to the member of Congress.

A good example of how to conduct a brief call with a Congressional office (taken from Congress.org) is: "Please tell Senator/ Representative (Name) that I support/oppose (Bill number and name of bill)." If you're comfortable doing so, share with the staff member your reasons for supporting or opposing the bill.

Letters and emails to lawmakers
Be sure to use the correct salutation in your written communications with lawmakers. Lawmakers are addressed as "The Honorable (name)" and the correct salutation is their title, for example, "Dear Representative (last name). Examples are listed below, and if you're still unsure, this website Forms of Address for Elected Officials provides a comprehensive list of how to address every type of U.S. elected official.

In your letter, identify yourself by name in the first paragraph, and tell them where you live. This helps identify you as a constituent. If you don't live in their district, but your facility is located there, be sure to indicate that. Also, list any professional credentials you hold that are related to the subject about which you're writing. Your letter/email should always include your complete mailing address, phone number and email address.

State the purpose for your letter in the first paragraph, and if it pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it appropriately by number and name. It's best to only discuss one issue, and try to keep your letter to a single page (and emails to an equivalent length). This increases the chance it will be read—remember, lawmakers and their staff members receive a lot of mail/emails—you want to make they read yours!

Lay out your position using key points, and use data and real examples to back up the position you're taking. Make sure any facts, data and information you use is credible. It's fine to cite specific data sources if they lend more weight to your position. Be sure to clearly state what it is you want your lawmaker to do so they understand what action is being requested. Always thank your lawmaker for their attention to your letter, and offer to provide additional information if they need it.

Writing to Local Lawmakers
Local Lawmakers are *The Honorable (full name)*
Dear Councilman/Councilwoman (last name):
Dear Mayor (last name):
Dear Commissioner (last name):

Writing to State Lawmakers
State Lawmakers are *The Honorable (full name)*
Dear Senator/Representative (last name):

The exception to the above is when you are writing the Speaker of the House, or a Committee Chair. In those cases you should address them as Dear Mr. Chairman/Madam Chairwoman, and Dear Mr. Speaker/Madam Speaker.

Writing/Emailing Members of Congress
Address both postal mail and emails in the same manner:

To the Senate:
The Honorable (full name)
______ Senate Office Building
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

To the House:
The Honorable (full name)
______ House Office Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

Communicating with Lawmakers—Meetings

Meeting face to face with lawmakers is an effective way to build relationships and advocate your positions. Once you have determined you want to meet with a lawmaker follow these steps for a productive meeting.

Schedule a meeting
Contact the lawmaker's office and request a meeting. If you are requesting a meeting with a member of Congress, you will be working directly with a staff member called the scheduler. This person is the gatekeeper for the lawmaker's entire schedule. Some offices may require you to fill out a formal request for a meeting, and the scheduler can direct you through that process. A great way to access members of Congress is when they are back home in their districts during Congressional breaks, usually around federal holidays.

Purpose of meeting
The staff/scheduler will ask for the subject matter of the meeting. This allows the lawmaker and staff to prepare for the meeting, and make sure they have the right folks at the meeting.

Who's coming?
You'll want to provide the names and contact information of the individuals from your group who will be at the meeting. Providing contact information helps the lawmaker identify individuals as constituents.

Length of meeting
The time of year and the lawmaker's schedule will determine the length of time for which you're scheduled. Congressional visits in Washington, DC don't often exceed 15 minutes due to the high volume of constituent meetings. Local, regional and state lawmakers may be able to allow more time for meetings. In some cases, you may be contacting local lawmakers directly to set up meeting times. The lawmaker or staff contact will let you know how long the appointment will be once the meeting is confirmed.

Lawmaker Contact Information

Not sure who your lawmakers are? These government website links will help identify your lawmakers and provide contact information.

U.S. Senators

U.S. Representatives

State Lawmakers

Mayors

Contact your city or county government, or school board to get information on local elected officials.

Requests for photos
You may want to take a photo of you or your group meeting with the lawmaker. Such photos are useful in publicizing the meeting to your members. Mention the photo when you request the meeting, it's usually no problem—lawmakers seem to like having their photo taken.

Confirm the meeting
It's a good idea to reconfirm the meeting time 24 to 48 hours in advance, just to make sure everything is still on as planned.

Prepare "leave behind" materials
Your time with the lawmaker will be brief, so prepare a one-page "leave behind" document that covers the key points you will be making during your meeting. Make sure the document has your organization's website and contact information on it.

Some groups prepare elaborate folders of information for lawmakers, and while these packets look nice, the reality is, most go unread and end up in the office recycling bin. Keeping your leave behind document to one page, uncluttered, with easy to read key points will greatly increase the chances it will be read, and perhaps even kept for reference.

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Anatomy of a Lawmaker Meeting

Always **arrive on time** to an appointment with a lawmaker. Often they are on a tight schedule and have many meetings throughout the day. It's best to arrive just a few minutes early. If the office is ahead of schedule, they may go ahead and start your meeting early. On the flip side, be patient if the office is behind schedule and you have to wait. Use the time to think about how you may have to present your information in a shorter amount of time than originally planned.

Be sure to **present your business card**, and ask for one from any staff members with whom you meet. Staff business cards often contain direct contact information for the individual. This comes in handy when sending emails or contacting staff by phone.

Because you have limited time with the lawmaker, be sure to **keep the meeting on track and focused on the issue at hand.** Lawmakers enjoy meeting with constituents and may want to chat about items that aren't relevant to the purpose of your meeting. A small amount of this type of conversation at the beginning of the meeting during introductions is fine, but make sure it doesn't eat up valuable time you need to share your message with the lawmaker.

Explain your position on the issue(s), and how a bill or amendment will affect your profession/industry. **Stick to the talking points** you prepared in advance. Share your leave behind materials with the lawmaker and staff with whom you meet. You may be asked a question to which you don't know the answer—this is okay. Simply say that you don't have that information but that you will follow up after the meeting. (Then make sure to follow up!) It is perfectly okay not to have the all the answers, just don't ever make anything up.

When you're meeting with a lawmaker on behalf of STMA or your chapter, remember, you're there to communicate your group's position, not your personal position. However, it is definitely appropriate to use specific examples of how a measure will impact you personally at your facility.

Be clear about what you're asking your lawmaker to do. Are you there to introduce yourself and familiarize the lawmaker with your profession, or are you asking the lawmaker to support or oppose a piece of legislation? If you're meeting with a lawmaker who is supportive of your issue, it can be helpful to ask if they have any advice on how to approach other lawmakers on the issue, or if there are other groups with whom you should liaise.

Dealing with difficult meetings

Sometimes meeting with a lawmaker will feel like walking into the proverbial lion's den. The lawmaker in question has clearly stated a position that is contrary to yours. The lawmaker may even be the sponsor of a piece of legislation you're opposing. And, in extreme cases, the lawmaker may even come across as hostile during a meeting.

Don't panic or despair: remain calm and professional. This is when all your preparation comes into play, and sound, factual information delivered effectively can still help. Strive to keep the tone as positive as possible. You may not win the lawmaker over to your side, but your professionalism will go a long way toward earning his/her respect.

Don't be disappointed if you do not meet with the lawmaker personally, and meet instead with a member of staff. Staff members are often subject matter experts and do the bulk of the work on your issues on behalf of the lawmaker. They are an important resource and **building rapport with staff members can be very beneficial.**

Refrain from engaging in an argument with a lawmaker during a meeting. Listen to the lawmaker's opinions and position on the issue. If you believe the lawmaker hasn't clearly understood your position, it's okay to clarify it, or ask the lawmaker to expand on a point. Verbal sparring may be fun, but it's no way to make friends!

You will have an opportunity to follow up with the office to restate your position and provide information that addresses the lawmaker's position. End the meeting on a friendly note even if it didn't go as well as you would have liked. You will have to continue to work with the lawmaker on the issue until it's resolved. In addition, you may need this lawmaker as an ally in the future on another issue so **it's best to maintain a friendly working relationship even if you're on opposite sides.**

Thank the lawmaker for taking the time to meet with you, and don't forget to take a photo for use in communicating with your members about the meeting. It is okay to ask a staff member to take the photo. Fancy cameras aren't necessary; you can snap a few shots with a smart phone or digital camera. The lawmaker or staff may even ask for a copy to use in their constituent newsletter, website or social media properties.

After the meeting, be sure to **follow up with thank you notes** to the individuals with whom you met. Use the thank you as an opportunity to briefly restate your position and points on the issue. And, don't forget to provide any information you promised to send after the meeting.

Mailed vs. emailed thank you notes

In today's digital age, an email thank you is perfectly acceptable and in some cases preferable. At the federal level, an email thank you is the quickest way follow-up after a meeting because postal mail to Congress can be delayed because of the way printed mail is screened for security reasons.

At the local and state levels a handwritten thank you note is more likely to be received in a timely manner. If you have an existing personal relationship with a lawmaker, a handwritten thank you note is always appropriate.

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Communicating with Lawmakers—More ways to build relationships

Every time you communicate with a lawmaker, you're engaged in relationship building. Here are some suggestions on how to go about getting to know your lawmakers, and helping your lawmakers get to know you.

Attend town hall meetings/community roundtables
Lawmakers routinely host or participate in town hall meetings or community round tables. They do this to solicit feedback directly from their constituents. Be sure to watch lawmaker websites and social media pages for opportunities to interact in person.

Volunteer for a campaign
A great way to build relationships with lawmakers is to volunteer on their election campaigns. Everyone, whether running for city council or the U.S. Senate, needs and depends upon help from supporters to get elected.

Attend a Fundraiser
For elected officials fundraising is a constant is a fact of life. Attending a fundraiser and contributing to a candidate you support can be a great way to develop a relationship. While you're certainly not buying a lawmaker's support with a campaign contribution, they do tend to remember who has supported them financially and this can be useful when you need help on an issue.

Attend meetings open to the public
City councils, county commissions, zoning authorities and legislatures (just to name a few) conduct their official business in open public forums. You can attend these meetings to learn firsthand how their decisions are made. There are often opportunities to provide comment on issues. And of course, you can always take the opportunity to introduce yourself to your lawmaker in person.

Host a site visit at your facility
Inviting lawmakers to your facility to experience what you do is a great way to further your advocacy agenda and build relationships. (See *Hosting a Facility Tour for Lawmakers*)

Follow them on social media
Follow your lawmakers on social media to keep up with issues. Many use social media to get feedback from their constituents. (See *Social Media and Advocacy*)

Host a legislative advocacy day
A legislative day at your state capitol or in Washington DC can get your message out to a large of lawmakers at once. (See *Hosting a Legislative Advocacy Day*)

Hosting a Facility Tour for Lawmakers

One of the best ways to familiarize lawmakers with your profession is to invite them to see and experience firsthand what you and your colleagues do. A visit to a sports turf facility not only can result in a deeper understanding of issues important to the industry, but is also a valuable way to demonstrate how lawmaker decisions impact your members. It also allows the opportunity to highlight the importance of sports turf facilities within the local, state and national economies.

The following is a brief overview of the main components of a facility tour.

Planning a tour
Decide which lawmakers will be invited to attend. Your event may be designed as a general "get to know you" tour for a larger group of lawmakers, or it may be designed to specifically target a smaller group of lawmakers who have influence over active issues impacting your industry. You can also invite media to be part of the tour, just make sure that lawmakers are aware and comfortable that they will be there.

Plan the tour from beginning to end, and determine how much time is needed for each step along the way. Prepare a script and talking points for the tour guide(s). Include information on your members, your profession, the facility, and management practices.

Select the members from your organization who will conduct the tour. These individuals should be knowledgeable, well spoken and respected within the profession. Decide on the message you want lawmakers to take away at the end of the tour, and prepare talking points for all of your members who will be present.

Conducting the facility tour
The tour is your opportunity to educate lawmakers, so be sure to highlight management practices and tools used at the facility. Tie these practices to the advocacy issues that are important to your association. If possible, allow lawmakers to participate in some type of maintenance activity at the facility—if applicable, provide any necessary safety equipment.

Using signage and printed materials during the tour is also a great way to educate lawmakers. Beginning and ending the tour with a short presentation or briefing from your association's president is a good way to set the tone for the event. It sets expectations at the beginning, and allows for any unanswered questions to be addressed at the end of the event.

Encourage your members to engage with lawmakers during the event. This is a chance to demonstrate the professionalism of your members and the importance of your industry. Don't forget to take photos during the tour so you can use them in your publications and social media outlets. You can also include photos with the thank you notes you send to the lawmakers after the event.

Please Don't Feed the Lawmakers
The title of this section is a bit tongue in cheek, but it does bring up a serious issue. Lawmakers at all levels of government must comply with ethics laws. These laws are often called "gift laws" and spell out exactly what lawmakers can and cannot accept in the way of gifts and meals. Knowing what the law allows as you plan your event will help streamline the planning process.

The rules vary from state to state so be sure to check before you plan your event. In some states you may be able to offer breakfast or lunch as part of your tour. In others, it may not be allowed at all, but light refreshments are okay. You may want to give lawmakers a small token from your association, such as a pen or hat. In some cases, this will be acceptable. Again, check the ethics laws to see what can and cannot be accepted by lawmakers.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, generally, non-lobbyists are not completely prohibited from giving gifts, but are limited to certain monetary values.

> *"Most states also specifically state that no one shall offer and no legislator shall accept any gift or anything of value in return for being influenced in the performance of the legislator's duties. Differences exist between what a lobbyist can give a legislator and what a legislator can receive from a lobbyist, the general public, or other outside interests."*

More information on state-specific bans can be found at this website Legislator Gift Restrictions Overview.

The U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate have their own ethics rules regarding gifts and meals. Information can be found at House Gift Rules, and Senate Gift Rules. If after reading the rules, you still have questions, it's perfectly okay to ask a legislative staff member for clarification. They are familiar with the rules and will be able to guide you.

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Hosting a Legislative Advocacy Day

Whether its called a "Day on the Hill", a "Legislative Fly-In", "A Day Under the Dome", or a "Legislative Summit", hosting a legislative advocacy day at a state capitol or in Washington DC can be a very successful way to spread your advocacy message to lawmakers.

A legislative advocacy day will be most successful if you have already done work as an organization to build relationships with lawmakers. Lawmakers are more likely to embrace an event if they are familiar with the organization.

Your advocacy agenda and priority issues are the basis for your meetings with lawmakers. Select no more than three issues to discuss with your lawmakers—remember your meeting times will likely be limited to no more than 15 minutes.

Try to schedule your event early in the legislative session. In most states January or February are good months. In Congress, March, April and May are popular months. Allow ample time for planning and scheduling your event—most are planned at least six months in advance to ensure all arrangements can be made to the group's satisfaction. Meetings with lawmakers aren't scheduled until approximately six weeks out from the event, and appointments are reconfirmed just prior to the event.

In addition to visits with lawmakers, your event can include a variety of advocacy related activities designed to advance your agenda. Here are some elements to consider as part of your event:

Legislative briefings
Invite a lawmaker, legislative staff member or industry advocate to address your members and provide an overview of the status of your issues within the current legislative body.

Advocacy training for members
Having a large group of members together in one place is an opportunity to conduct advocacy training. Role-playing in preparation for lawmaker visits, issue briefings and insight into the legislative process are all good topics.

Capitol tours
A tour of the capitol building can be interesting and a great way for your members to learn about your state's history while socializing. Most state capitol buildings have tour guides who can conduct tours. The U.S. Capitol building has an impressive visitor's center, and you can request a personalized Capitol tour through your member of Congress.

Media training
Consider inviting a member of the media to speak to your group on effective ways to communicate advocacy messages.

Working with Alliances and Coalitions

Sometimes the most effective way to advocate is to join your voice with others who share your position on an issue. Working collaboratively allows you to do more with less, share resources, and generally be more effective on issues than if you go it alone.

Alliances and coalitions can be especially useful for smaller organizations that do not have the member expertise, staff, time or financial resources to work an issue alone. Aligning with a coalition group that has technical expertise on a specific issue can be beneficial and can save your group time and resources.

For example, if water conservation is a topic of interest to your members and an advocacy issue in which your association wants to be involved, there may be coalitions already in place made up of scientists, researchers, practitioners and other experts who work solely on this issue every day. They likely have compiled a staggering amount of information and data on the issue that you could use in your advocacy efforts. Aligning with such a group would save your group time and resources that would otherwise have to be spent on researching and following this complex issue.

Alliances and coalitions can be temporary—in place for just one issue or single piece of legislation—or they can be sustained to deal with a complex, ongoing issue. There are groups in Washington DC and in state capitals that have been in place for decades. Others come and go within a legislative session.

Some advantages of working with coalitions

- Do more with less
- Shared resources
- Strength in numbers
- More voices on an issue
- Information sharing
- Increased awareness

Combining financial resources is a main reason many groups choose to form, or join a coalition. For example, your group may not be able to afford to hire a lobbyist to work on your behalf, but by combining resources with other groups that are working toward the same end, a lobbyist becomes affordable. Coalitions can also be very useful for public relations campaigns, which can be costly. Spreading the financial investment across a variety of groups not only increases the media buy, but it gets the message out to a much broader audience as each group activates its own grassroots network.

The adage "politics makes strange bedfellows" is often true, and your group may find itself forming an alliance with an unlikely group, either a group that has absolutely nothing to do with your industry or related industries, or even a group that on past issues has been considered the opposition. For these reasons, careful consideration is required before committing to a coalition.

When joining or forming a coalition, carefully consider the reputation of all groups. Are they well respected? Are they considered trustworthy? Do they share your core values? Do they project a professional image to lawmakers and the public? Will they be able to effectively and appropriately communicate the issue?

Each group will bring its own strengths and assets to the table. It's important to clearly define roles and responsibilities within the coalition so that there are no surprises. Assign a specific individual, or individuals, to represent your group on the coalition. This will help ensure consistency of message and will establish clear lines of authority for decision-making. Collaboratively establishing a decision-making process from the beginning will help ensure clear communication and smooth operation of the coalition.

- Clearly define roles and responsibilities
- Ensure consistent messages
- Establish a collaborative decision-making process
- Have clear expectations
- Recognize and spotlight member efforts within the coalition

Not all alliances and coalitions are created equally—meaning each group involved may have a different level of involvement and influence. Some groups may have more financial resources to put toward the effort, and therefore may take a larger leadership role within the coalition. Make sure your group is comfortable with the role they play within the coalition and that expectations are clear.

Because of the cooperative nature of such alliances, public credit for your group's efforts may not always be apparent. Be sure to recognize and spotlight to your members the role your group/individuals play in the coalition's efforts and successes. This will help your leaders make the case for continued participation and/or financial support of the coalition.

It's also important to remember that the groups, while cooperating on a common issue or goal, still have their own self-interests and agendas. Collaborate with groups that you believe will be able to focus on the shared goal, rather than on advancing their own agendas. When all the groups are working under shared expectations and goals, they avoid communicating conflicting voices/positions with lawmakers. This ensures there is no confusion or dilution of your message and efforts. Working within an alliance or coalition can be very beneficial to advocacy efforts, and can be an effective way to advance your advocacy agenda.

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Communicating with the Media

The American media plays and important and powerful role in shaping public policy. The media doesn't just "report" on government issues, they take an active role in influencing public opinion. Public policy fights are often won in the court of public opinion, so having the ability to influence how the media covers the issues that matter most to your association can be very helpful.

Just as being a credible and reliable source can help build strong relationships with lawmakers, so too can it build strong relationships with the media. Here are some steps for working with the media to advance your advocacy goals.

1. Identify a person or persons who are authorized to speak with the media. These should be members who are good speakers and well versed on the issues.

2. If you anticipate receiving questions about contentious issues, make sure your media representatives receive training on how to handle such questions.

3. Use your website and social media platforms as a way to communicate with media and provide information.

4. Respond promptly to requests for information from reporters. They are often on deadline and will appreciate your quick response.

5. Invite the media to your events. Send out invitations and press releases letting them know about your event(s). Highlight what is newsworthy—lawmaker attendance, an association milestone, members converging on the state capitol, etc.

6. Further your advocacy agenda by submitting letters to the editor. Published letters are read more than any other portion of the newspaper.

7. Be prepared for interviews. Whether it's for television, the web, or a printed publication, the media are looking for interesting, concise information and ear-catching sound bites. Know what you want to say before you go on camera. Stick to your talking points. Speak slowly and calmly and in a pleasant tone of voice.

8. Send thank you emails to reporters who cover your events, or write positive things about your association and its members.

Social Media and Advocacy

Use of social media has become a way for advocacy groups to quickly communicate with lawmakers, members, stakeholders and the public with little or no financial investment.

The potential for sharing advocacy messages is almost unlimited, and social media offers an interactive platform where readers can not only consume information, but also respond to it in "real time."

Lawmakers are using social media to communicate with their constituents. A recent study funded by the Library of Congress that examined how members of Congress are using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, shows that 98 percent of Congress is using at least one social media platform. And, 72 percent of Congress is using all three of the platforms examined in the study. Most members are using social media for stating their positions on issues.

Using social media can help your organization stay informed on advocacy issues and stay in touch with lawmakers. Your social media platforms can also be powerful tools for communicating your position on issues, as well as educating lawmakers and the public about your industry.

The impact of social media

"We no longer search for the news, the news finds us."

-Erik Qualman,
author of Socialnomics ™

Social media strategies for advancing your advocacy goals

- "Like" the Facebook pages of your lawmakers to stay current with what is happening
- Subscribe to lawmaker Twitter feeds
- Comment (respectfully and appropriately) on lawmaker Facebook posts
- Establish a Facebook page and Twitter account for your organization. Update them regularly with relevant, useful information.
- Utilize social media to state your group's position on issues
- Utilize social media to keep your members informed on advocacy issues
- Use social media to expand your network of advocacy contacts and information sources

How to Create an Organization Facebook Page

How to Set Up a Twitter Account

How to Set Up a YouTube Brand Channel

Hiring a Lobbyist

"Do we need to hire a lobbyist?" is a question often asked by associations as they craft their advocacy strategies. The answer depends on the needs of the group, and there are several factors to consider.

Hiring a lobbyist may be a smart strategy if your group does not have the resources (staff or designated member advocates) to effectively address an issue, or if an issue is extremely onerous and complex and would have serious consequences for your industry. Professional lobbyists are well-versed in the legislative process and can enhance advocacy efforts by acting as a watchdog on the issues. In addition, lobbyists often have relationships with lawmakers that have been built over time, thus giving them a level of access that your group may not have.

However, many associations are very successful with their advocacy efforts without the use of lobbyists. Associations and groups that have built relationships are knowledgeable and are viewed as credible are just as successful in working with lawmakers—without the services of a paid lobbyist. Often, a well-orchestrated grassroots campaign can yield the same, or better results.

Hiring a professional lobbyist can be an expensive consideration and some groups don't have the financial resources. Partnering with other organizations, such as coalitions, working on the same issues is one way to share the cost of professional representation.

Whether or not your group needs the services of a paid lobbyist will be determined by a number of factors including the issues being addressed, the political climate in which you're operating, the level of experience of your members, association resources, and your overall advocacy goals.

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