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Advocacy in a Pandemic

Global Perspectives by Camelia Bulat and Bob Harris, CAE

Now is the time to increase advocacy efforts, not put it on the back burner. During the pandemic, members are desperate. Rightfully, they turn to the association, their trusted source and indispensable partner.

Every member contact is an opportunity to hear their needs. Through conversations, surveys and cries for help, the association should identify their common of challenges.

At the Florida Swimming Pool Association, the pandemic brought on chaos. Local governments were adopting regulations that would have stopped their businesses. Through advocacy they were able to establish that pool service was is essential business.

FSPA created signs for member trucks promoting, "Clean Pools, an Essential Business," during the crisis. Members could continue to work, providing service to their customers. The indirect benefit is membership is growing because of their efforts.



Now More than Ever

An association or chamber of commerce knows their members and the business sector best. They have established open communication channels to hear the needs and challenges of members.

Advocacy starts with the association categorizing member concerns. Some may be concerned re-opening, others about regulatory requirements, and still others about business finances and loans.

Group the input into buckets in which the association can have influence. Transform problems into opportunities.

Each body of government seems to address the pandemic differently. Some focus on quarantines, others restrict the size of meetings, while others create stimulus packages including loans and grants.

Advocacy Plan

Members expect their organization to advocate on their behalf, representing their concerns and interests to government, media, and organizations with influence. Build a plan for effective advocacy.

☐ **Increase Communication**

Members fear the consequences of the crisis. They expect their organization to be proactive. Provide channels of communication to collect relevant information. Communicate that the association cares and is helping.

☐ **Identify Member Needs**

Inventory members' needs. They will vary from financial assistance to supply chain shortages. Transform their problems into association opportunities.

The Romania Retail Forum realized ninety percent of the non-food commerce occurs in shopping malls. In March, the government shuttered malls. Retailers have no income to pay their rent. Now the retailers can obtain a force majeure certificate at a significant discount, issued by the local chamber of commerce to avoid being evicted from the mall.

☐ **Galvanize a Force**

Nearly every membership organization has a government relations committee. Some have staff members who are experienced in government influence. Members should be engaged in grassroot support. This is not the time for a "wait and see" attitude. There is competition to be heard by government officials. Be determined about getting the attention of lawmakers.

☐ **Maintain Vigilance**

The pandemic is full of uncertainty. Governments are making proposals nearly daily. Listen closely to what is being discussed and be ready to take a stand. Be accessible if government leaders need to hear from you. Ask the membership to report everything they hear about proposals, regulations, and challenges.

☐ **Craft Your Messages**

Facts, data, and stories are most likely to influence government. While an emotional plea is moving, it may not have as much influence as facts. For instance, how many members will go out of business, how many employees could lose their jobs, how will the economy or community be impacted? Be certain the "elevator speech," website and

brochures give a clear image about your organization. Be specific: articulate very clearly what you want, nobody has time these days, help them to help you.

☐ **Channels of Influence**

There are many ways to influence public-private dialogs. You may approach lawmakers directly if they allow access. Social media and internet presence are methods for telling your story. Use members to reach local lawmakers, coordinated by the association.

☐ **Collaborate**

Multiple voices are usually better than one. Collaborate with allied organizations having mutual concerns. One of the best ways to identify collaborative partners is to look at the supply chain. For example, the grocers rely on trucking, retailing, and farming. Reach out to the relevant organizations.

☐ **Community Deeds**

It has been shown that advocacy is stronger when the community understands the issues. A good way to do that is to lead charitable efforts.

The Gambian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Africa raised an equivalent to \$294,000 USD in pledges from the private sector to renovate of a clinic to house COVID-19 patients. The business community efforts will support the government relief. Rather than donating money to the government, GCCI is using member labor and supplies such as donated construction materials and oxygen. This is an example of an association leading the private sector response to the crisis.

In the Ukraine, the members of the Young Business Club of Kharkov, funded and contributed personal protection equipment, a thousand face masks for first responders and 30 cartons of sanitizer. It was the coordinated work of YBC volunteers that spurred the efforts of business.

The Rhode Island Hospitality Association repurposed their educational foundation to help restaurant, hotel, and tourism employees who have been laid off and are facing financial hardship due to COVID-19. Many hotel associations in the USA are working closely with government to utilize vacant rooms for front line workers and persons in need.

☐ **Maintain the Membership**

Usually the more members, the louder the voice in talking with government. Be sure you do everything possible to keep the membership strong, including dues extensions, waivers, or fee reductions. Be proactive; do not make the members come to the organization saying they can no longer belong because of economic hardships.

❑ **Articulate Solutions**

Everybody can complain to government. It is associations and chambers that suggest innovative and strategic solutions to the problems. Be realistic, do not ask for things that are impossible or you will lose credibility and have no results.

The Associated General Contractors of Kentucky is working with government to provide relief to members participating in their self-insured workers' compensation program. This has increased positive communications with the members during the crisis and will result in distribution of checks exceeding \$3 million for members of sponsoring associations. Every association has a different approach to pandemic and economic recovery.

Government relations is the strength of business associations. In a crisis, advocacy is no longer a service, but a duty. Or as Rahm Emanuel the former mayor of Chicago advised, "you never want a serious crisis to go to waste."

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com. Camelia Bulat is a senior consultant at the Center for Private Enterprise and is based in Bucharest, Romania.

