



GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS: WHAT'S THE USE?

By **Molly Sausaman**, Executive Director, American Beekeeping Federation

Ask a room full of association management professionals about why their association does or does not embrace government affairs as a core function, and the number of different responses you'll hear will likely match the headcount of that room. When evaluating whether to launch lobbying and advocacy initiatives, there are many factors to consider. The key is to determine how relevant these efforts are to members.

It's reasonable to expect members to attach different values to government affairs as a membership benefit depending on the type of association they belong to (individual membership organization, trade association, hybrid/combination). Some in the association

management community may even argue that lobbying and advocacy are not membership benefits at all because they serve the interests of an entire industry rather than members only.

According to *Marketing General Incorporated's 2018 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report*, advocacy is reported as the second most important reason why members join trade associations. This finding makes sense knowing the purpose of trade associations is to keep businesses on top of important, ever-changing issues, trends and legislation within their marketplace. They advocate for the workers in the industry as well as for the consumers who purchase the industry's products.

An equally interesting finding from the *2018 Association Communications Benchmarking Report* by Naylor Association Solutions indicates that "lobbying/advocacy efforts" ranks as the fifth most important topic of communication to members by associations. This finding is a bit less intuitive and could easily drive managers of all types of associations to contemplate the importance of lobbying and advocacy to their membership.

WHAT, THEN, ARE SOME OF THE ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST ESTABLISHING A GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS PROGRAM?

ARGUMENT FOR: “Members pay dues expecting to be represented. Period.”

COUNTERARGUMENT: “Representing legislative and regulatory issues for an industry takes very special knowledge that our staff is not equipped to provide.”

ARGUMENT AGAINST: “Showing the benefit of advocacy is difficult. The process is slow, and results can take years.”

COUNTERARGUMENT: “Simply keeping members informed of current industry issues impacting their profession can be promoted as an added value of membership.”

ARGUMENT FOR: “By giving members an advocacy outlet, we can expand our reach while creating stronger bonds with our current members.”

COUNTERARGUMENT: “It’s a struggle to activate a membership of busy professionals without some looming crisis.”

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ARGUMENT AGAINST: “We don’t have the budget to pay a lobbyist. Market uncertainty forces us to be prudent with expenditures.”

COUNTERARGUMENT: “If we’re not lobbying on behalf of our members, then our opponents are lobbying against them.”

ARGUMENT FOR: “Our association can leverage connections to secure hard-to-get meetings more effectively than our members can do for themselves.”

COUNTERARGUMENT: “We open ourselves up to conflict with individual member companies that have their own lobbyists.”

AND THE LIST GOES ON.

If your association is considering taking on a government affairs role, ask yourself whether there is a definable reason to influence legislation or regulation or public policy in a direction that supports the interests of your membership. If the answer is anything other than an emphatic “Yes,” then perhaps a few more hours spent at the drawing board will serve you well.

In associations where lobbying and advocacy are important to members, this work becomes a daily, year-round job, and it’s not without challenges. These efforts absorb a lot of bandwidth among staff, but with the proper resources and a realistic set of expectations, your government affairs program may end up becoming one of your most recognized and appreciated member benefits.

Before dismissing the possibility of expanding your association’s reach beyond traditional professional development and networking activities, think about what the association and its membership can gain from lobbying and advocacy accomplishments. Whether it’s influencing legislation for the betterment of the industry or whether it’s creating original content for your overarching content marketing strategy, the appeal of a successful government affairs program is abundant.

But, do your members really care? The answer could be, “Yes,” but there’s always a chance the answer is “No.” ■



Molly Sausaman has served local, state, regional, national and international organizations over the past two decades and relishes the dynamic nature of the association management profession. She can be reached at msausaman@abfnnet.org.