



# GROWING FUTURE Political Leaders

*Sprouting up across the country, chamber candidate schools are one-stop grassroots lobbying shops*

by Cathy Lada

**W**hat's the best way to have the business community involved in the halls of government? Chambers employ a wide range of techniques and vehicles to engage the business community in shaping civic life at all levels of government: "eggs & issues" member seminars, "state of" the city and county addresses, receptions, state capitol or D.C. fly-ins, intercity leadership visits, town hall meetings, direct appeals for lobbying help, candidate forums, and more. The business community's involvement and par-

ticipation is critical as chambers take the lead in shaping and influencing the direction their communities will take.

Granted, these efforts can be very effective in engaging current business and political leadership in grassroots lobbying and even in grooming future leaders. With the spread of term limits, business leaders lack the time to engage in lobbying or in running for elected office. The growing complexity of running for and holding elected office has chambers looking for more avenues to ensure a quality pool of elected community leaders. One such road leads right into elected office.



"If you really want to make an impact, start some type of candidate training," says **David Hinderliter, President and CEO, Kankakee River Valley (IL) Chamber of Commerce.** "You become the guru of elections and in time the chamber will be irreplaceable in all local elections without that worrisome candidate support that the volunteers are so afraid of."

So, what do chambers teach? Candidate school participants typically learn about developing a campaign strategy, creating a platform, fundraising, getting organized, filing nomination papers, reporting requirements, ethics, media and effective communication. Part of the program may also include a panel of elected officials who share their personal experiences and insights, as well as guest speakers who have many years of experience in either managing or working on a campaign.

Whether a half-day or several days over the course of a few weeks or months, candidate training schools are an invaluable resource for busy business and community leaders. Also, it's a powerful tool for chambers in engaging these same people in the political process. The chamber can become known as *the* place for candidates to learn how to run a campaign. Potential candidates can learn what makes an effective public official, including what issues are on the chamber's policy agenda.

#### Getting business into office

First and foremost, potential candidates for office need to know where to go for information, and once they get it, whether or not they want to actually move forward and run for office. This is where the chamber can play an invaluable role in helping them with both objectives.

Before 1999 when the chamber in Oklahoma City began its "Practical Politics Seminar," potential candidates had to visit several city, county, state or federal government offices just to find all of the forms needed to run for office, and there was nowhere to go for all of the nuts and bolts of running a campaign. Most chambers that have their own candidate schools report that this was the case in their own communities as well, representing a significant barrier in getting busy business leaders to consider running for office.

"In 1999, a former city mayor approached us about getting more business people into office," says **Dean Schirf, Corporate Secretary and Vice President Government Relations, Greater Oklahoma City (OK) Chamber of Commerce.** "We think it's very important to get more people with a business background into government so they know what it is to meet a payroll. Some of our elected officials have been in the public sector all of their lives." Thus, the chamber partnered with the former mayor and co-developed the city's first—and only—training seminar for candidates. "We're now known as a one-stop shop for running for office," says Schirf.

The chamber's half-day program covers all aspects of campaigning—from polling to ethics and from filing requirements to where to spend your limited advertising dollars to achieve the best return. In addition to representatives from the city's election board, Schirf's speakers include polling specialists, current elected officials, and others with expertise in running and winning elections, primarily at the local and

state levels, though they've had some congressional candidates as well.

The most popular segment of the seminar, says Schirf, is the panel 'Q & A' facilitated by sitting and former elected officials who spoke to the realities of holding office. "Our seminar participants questioned our panel—the chairman of the Oklahoma County Commission, a city councilmember, member of the city school board, and former state senator—for over an hour at our last seminar," he said.

Once potential candidates have access to the realities of running for and holding office, though, beware—they may change their minds about running for office. "We have had people say 'no way' after going through the class," says Kankakee's Hinderliter.

In fact, rather than offering all candidates the same in-depth "how to run" seminar, the chamber in Northern Kentucky offers two different types of seminars biannually, synced with the community's election cycles. One session is geared toward new candidates and one to experienced candidates. "The 'new candidate' session helps people who are still just considering becoming a candidate weigh the pros and cons and understand what is involved from current politicians as well as those with other types of expertise," says **Steve Stevens, CCE, Senior Vice President, Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.** "The 'experienced candidate' session gets into more detail on putting an organization together, campaign finance and marketing yourself as a candidate."

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*Nancy Friedman, circa 1983*

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## In A Nutshell: Campaign School Components

Thinking about starting your own candidate school? Here are some common course subjects you'll want to consider offering. Course instructors could be representatives from your local elections commission, current and former elected officials, university professors, and member attorneys or professionals in public relations, research and polling, or advertising and marketing.

- **Defining Yourself as a Candidate**
  - What will be expected and required of me if elected?
  - What impact will being elected have on my life?
    - My family?
  - Why am I doing this?
  - Am I qualified?
  - What is my mission and my message?
  - Am I ready to run?
  - Why should people vote for me?
- **Planning a Campaign**
  - Polling, research, and issues
  - Analyzing the demographics of your race
  - Using demographics analysis to campaign
  - Using voting lists/targeting voters
- **Fundraising**
  - How to get money, how to spend money
  - Party support (expectations vs. realism)
  - Campaign debt
  - PAC facts
- **Marketing Yourself**
  - Personal appearances
  - Publicity: How much will it cost?
  - Print ads
  - Radio spots, TV commercials, billboards
  - Producing a brochure, flier, & signs
  - Organizing phone banks
  - Advertising venues, door to door (one on one) campaigning
  - Precinct chairpersons & community activists
  - Sidestepping controversy
- **The Media**
  - Understanding the media
  - Interviews: handling a hot topic
  - Seeking endorsements
- **Compliance**
  - Requirements & timeline for filing
  - Local/state/federal laws, rules and regulations
  - Submitting required financial statements
  - Filing forms

Source: ACCE

### Wins and headway

Chambers gauge the success of their programs in many ways. In addition to the obvious triumph of having program graduates win the seats for which they are running, chambers count as successes the greater number of business leaders exposed to the political process, increases in publicity as a result of the

program and its winners, the opportunity to recognize and further partner with policy allies, and the opportunity to get their top issues in front of a group who could potentially be leading their communities in the future.

By incorporating some issue briefings into their candidate schools, chambers have found a new way to influence the policy decisions of a captive audience who could potentially owe their electoral success in some small part to the chamber that trained them. "These types of programs are tremendous opportunities to build goodwill, inform and educate policy makers and would-be decision-makers on your agenda, and build your chamber's public image during a campaign," says **Bruce Bohrer, Senior Vice President of Public Policy, Lincoln (NE) Chamber of Commerce**. "You can rise above the fray as long as you make it non-partisan and issue-driven."

These hybrid training programs give participants a better understanding of the local political process both in search of and once in office. **Judi Norton, Senior Vice President of Communications, Greater Pine Bluff (AR) Chamber of Commerce** says, "It is important for chambers to develop a process to foster among political candidates a more thorough understanding of the political process and the relationship between public policy and community/economic development."

Chambers like those in Beaumont, Tex., Battle Creek, Mich., Kalamazoo, Mich., Pine Bluff, Ark., and Lincoln, Neb., have adopted a similar philosophy for their programs. The candidate training program in Battle Creek, Mich., for instance, currently features speakers from both sides of the aisle to focus on issues rather than partisan politics.

### Expect new allies

Once elected, program graduates can become great chamber allies; they also help generate more public goodwill and positive public relations for the chamber. "Our graduates have included our county judge, sheriff, county quorum court members, a circuit judge, some city aldermen and alderwomen, two state senators and some state representatives," says Norton.

Program graduates can even become chamber ambassadors. In Oklahoma City, the current mayor, who himself attended the seminar prior to winning his first city council seat, is a speaker at that chamber's candidate training school. "He epitomizes all we are looking for," says Schirf. "Our mayor is a former businessman who ran a very successful company here, and is having a great run as an elected official representing our city. He understands the private side of the ledger."

The Kankakee chamber is considering adding a component to its course that will help facilitate positive publicity by awarding a certificate of completion from the "Good Government Council of the Chamber." The chamber hopes the certificate is mentioned in campaign literature.

In Green Bay, the Good Government Council acts as a focal point for the voluntary political involvement of business people and others interested in the Green Bay metropolitan area. "Our program works to recruit, train and assist candidates running for political office and is independent of any political party, candidates, or organizations, except our chamber," says **Paul Jadin, President, Green Bay (WI) Area Chamber of Commerce** and a former mayor of the city.



Jadin brings a unique perspective to the concept of chamber candidate schools—he is a graduate of the Green Bay chamber's program and attributes the 1995 success of his dark-horse candidacy to the chamber's endorsement of his bid for mayor. Indeed, he was the first candidate the chamber's council endorsed. After two successful terms as mayor, Jadin stepped down to pursue other interests and was himself pursued—by the chamber's board of directors—and was hired in April 2003.

He's used his perspective to tweak the chamber's program and personally conducts the candidate training, to great success. Jadin reached out personally to the CEOs of his 1,300 member companies to have them identify two to three senior executives who could run for office. In the November 2003 races, which were the first and only elections held since he joined the chamber, he trained twelve potential candidates. Of those, two were elected county board supervisors and one was elected to the school board. In addition, all ten of the state and federal (the only levels the chamber endorses) candidates the chamber's Good Government Council endorsed carried their counties.

"We're pleased with the successes we've had in mobilizing the business community to run for office and have found a great number of qualified candidates, although they're concentrated in just a few districts, leading to head-to-head



## Resources

[www.battlecreek.org/candidateschool/](http://www.battlecreek.org/candidateschool/)

races," says Jadin. "One of our great challenges going forward for the 2005 elections will be identifying and reaching out to candidates in a wider number of districts."

Beyond potentially developing pro-business candidates for office, candidate training schools also offer an opportunity to engage more business leaders in grassroots lobbying by demystifying the political process. Six years ago, the chamber in Eau Claire began its program and called it a "candidate school." Soon, the chamber changed the name to "campaign training school" to appeal to an even a broader perspective and audience. They redesigned the program to appeal to those considering running for a public office, working on a campaign or even just wanting to know more about the political process. This broader strategy proved to be even more successful for the chamber.

"Candidate training schools are really good programs to develop potential pro-business candidates but are also effective in creating a more involved citizenry," says **Jackie Pavel-ski, Public Affairs Director, Eau Claire (WI) Area Chamber of Commerce**. "We measure the success of the program not only by the number of people that decide to run for office, but also by the number of members that become more involved. Our public affairs program has grown as a result with increasing grassroots involvement."

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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.

One chamber's civil justice 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.

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. 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.

### Build, build, build

However you choose to build your coalitions, know that their very existence is step in the right direction. Making them strong, efficient, and forward-thinking is some of the most important work a chamber can do. ☐

*Mick Fleming is the President of ACCE. Before coming to ACCE in 2002, Mick was a lobbyist for the Business Council of New York State, Inc. This article was adapted from his book, Making Your Chamber Make a Difference: How to Initiate & Re-engineer Public Affairs Programs for Chambers of Commerce, originally published in 1997 and scheduled for revised release by ACCE early next year.*

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### Candidate school start-up

As with any other chamber program, having a solid business plan and planning committee are essential. Start with a strong planning committee, composed of influential members who can provide access to elected officials and others willing to serve as faculty, as well as members who will help secure speakers and help chamber staff with program marketing and logistics.

It's also helpful to establish goals, objectives and outcomes for the series with your planning committee. Will you measure success by the number of attendees? The amount of ink (or pixels) published that talk up your program? The number of attendees who win their office? Each goal will require aligning resources, logistics, and marketing to achieve.

Determining what subjects to cover in the program is also important. Will your seminar focus solely on the mechanics of campaigning or will you incorporate some issues training? See the sidebar for an outline of campaign-related topics typical candidate schools offer.

What about the budget? Most chamber candidate schools do not generate significant revenue. For example, the Battle Creek, Mich., Chamber's candidate school committee secures one member as a sponsor for its Public Service Candidate Information Seminar. The sponsorship allows the chamber to offer the Public Service Candidate School to the public at no charge. The chamber references the sponsor on the registration form, news releases, and advertisements and thanks the sponsor at each session.

"We streamlined the process from several training sessions spread out over a few weeks to one informational session held in the evening," says **Kathleen Mechem, President and CEO, Battle Creek (MI) Area Chamber of Commerce**. "We find that this encourages greater attendance by potential candidates, and helps us meet our goal of providing high quality information about the election process and the roles and responsibilities of elected officials to candidates and the public."

In addition to sponsorships, a small participant fee, from \$25 to \$100, depending on the length and depth of the program, can also be appropriate. The program in Eau Claire is \$60 for three 3-hour evening sessions, though the price will rise in 2006. In Oklahoma City, the one-half day program includes breakfast and lunch for \$20. In both cases, the chamber secures corporate sponsorships to cover the hard costs of the programs such as meals and training materials.

### One more tool

Every chamber should be actively involved in the stewardship of its pool of future community leaders. Candidate schools can be one very effective tool chambers can use to engage current business and political leadership in grassroots lobbying and even in grooming future leaders. "It's up to chambers to come up with more ways to be more effective in the political process, because government is getting more entrenched in the business sector," says Oklahoma City's Schirf. ☐

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