

Government Relations – Positioning, Coalitions and Measuring Success

It is rare to find an association that is not involved in some form of government relations (advocacy) activity. When setting strategic direction, an association examines trends and issues in the external environment to consider potential impacts. One key external environment area reviewed is the political sector. Political trends and issues can affect the way an association and its members do business, practice, and/or provide valuable services to communities, organizations and individuals.

Most associations are involved with one or more levels of government beyond statutory reporting. Associations are involved in partnerships, obtaining financial support and influencing the public policy debate on a variety of issues. Being a tax preference organization with provincial and federal governments is reason enough to be involved and monitor government activity.

Some associations have formal government relations activities identified in their Communication Plan and allocate significant resources to achieve their government relations goals. Others approach government relations efforts on an infrequent basis and may allocate limited financial support due to scarce resources, lack of training, and being unaware of the issues. They prefer to follow the leaders or will not act unless a clear and imminent threat is evident. Which scenario applies to your organization?

Some government relations activities are sensitive and there may be a wide split in membership opinion on some issues. Member surveys help Boards understand the importance of government relations activity as a member benefit and determine which issues, if any, need to be addressed.

For some associations government relations activity can be an endless pit. There are no limits as to the amount of money that can be spent on activities. Before you start throwing money in the pit, it is critical to identify the issues your members want you to go after, set priorities, develop desired positioning, determine available resources, establish a basis for measuring success and evaluation, and develop an action plan. This approach may prevent an association from spreading itself too thinly and help focus on one or two issues where its position is taken seriously. This type of thinking leads to pro-active government relations activity.

Positioning and Partnership Coalitions

Most associations are in a position to develop their desired positioning with government and support it with a plan. They then become one of many associations lined up to engage in government relations activity. Results are not usually achieved in the next quarter – depending on the issue it could take years of effort, and in many cases, the ultimate goal is not achieved.

I have been told by senior bureaucrats on more than one occasion that associations are too fragmented. Government prefers to deal with a lesser number of groups. As a result, the group representing many associations moves to the head of the list. What does this mean? It means that your positioning and efforts to be taken seriously advance when you engage in partnership coalitions. Coalitions work. They respond to governments desire for consensus. They make better use of human and fiscal resources, benefit from economies of scale, and increase the chances for success.

Partnership coalitions are not easy to establish and maintain. Key questions to ask to ensure partnerships get off the ground and operate successfully include:

- Do we not only understand the values, goals and constraints of the partnership itself but also the values, goals and constraints of the other partners?
- Do we have a shared vision and clear expectations of what will constitute success?
- Do we have policies that will deal with use of staff resources, funding, publicity, general communications, conflict on issues, clearly defined roles and responsibilities and reporting?
- Do we have a supportive operational plan and enough human and financial resources?

A health association executive recently suggested that once you have been involved in one or two partnership coalitions, they become easier to administer. While you do give up some measure of control, this is offset by increased influence and a better use of resources.

Measurement

How is the success of government relations activity measured? How will you know today and in the future that you accomplished what you set out to accomplish? The answer is to include performance indicators in the early stages of planning. Performance indicators may relate to new or amended legislation, approval for financial support or whatever the association wants to do, such as being consulted on issues that relate to members' activity. Timelines should be attached to the performance indicators. Reports indicating progress toward the performance indicators within the desired timelines should be provided on a regular basis. This reporting allows the Board to consider corrective action or cease activities due to other priorities.

Associations need to eliminate as much risk as possible in government relations activity.

- Do not take too much information to the meeting.
- Do not fail to provide advance copies of any position paper, and provide an executive summary.

- Do not book an appointment for yourself and show up with three others.
- Do not call only when there is something you need.
- Do not fail to acknowledge efforts and action by the government that have been beneficial to the association's members;
- Read the plans and reports of the department to understand what they are involved in.
- Do not use acronyms in reports and presentations.
- Use the government's own language.
- Focus on what unites rather than what divides; and be seen as a constructive source.

Students in CSAE's Association Management Education Program (AME) often discuss how difficult it is to measure government relations success, as efforts can be spread over many years. Surveys are a good indicator of public or membership perceptions in terms of success. Other methods involve the use of report card type activity where success can be measured by legislative changes, contracts or funds received, completion of process steps such as meetings, and media coverage. One association likes to look at the efforts of other similar associations to measure its success.

An association can reduce mistakes and increase its effectiveness by seeking out government relations best practices. An example of a best practice follows:

Board, staff and outside consultants usually take the lead role in government relations and sometimes members do not understand why the association cannot have government put in place or revise some policy in three months. To increase understanding and the number of participants to support and expand the scope of government relations efforts, an association can provide government relations training opportunities for members.

You can find practices like these in the Best Practices section at www.csae.com.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.