

Go Beyond Lobbying: Using Advocacy Effectively



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Associations can play an important role in influencing policy and legislation through their advocacy efforts, especially when they take their government relations work beyond traditional lobbying.

The mission of professional societies is primarily educational and informational. Though focused on developing professional excellence in their fields through journals, meetings, and scientific exchange, such groups can also leverage their expertise and influence on Capitol Hill. These organizations can distinguish themselves as objective, evidence-based promoters of the highest standards, while remaining steadfast to a core mission.

Congress has a deep and abiding interest in the public policy issues on which many professional societies and their members are focused. Tracking congressional activities in relevant areas doesn't just keep an association's members abreast of regulatory and legislative proposals; it also offers significant opportunities to provide input to important policymakers in Congress and at federal agencies. Remaining proactive, rather than reactive, is crucial.

Advocacy vs. Lobbying

Advocacy can take several forms: lobbying, grassroots engagement, white papers or policy documents, education on specialized or technical information, and public relations and communications outreach.

Unfortunately, many people refer to these efforts collectively as lobbying rather than the more accurate term, government relations. In reality, lobbying is just one aspect of advocacy or government relations. This is an important distinction because often professional associations focus their advocacy efforts on creating policy documents and providing technical information, rather than traditional lobbying.

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Under the Internal Revenue Code, the lobbying activities of Section 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations are limited. While associations may engage in some lobbying or advocacy work, the tax code requires that lobbying must remain an insubstantial part of their activities.

This rule makes it important to understand what does not constitute lobbying, including these examples:

- providing technical advice to a governmental body in response to a written communication
- performing nonpartisan analysis or research that is an independent and objective exposition of a particular subject matter, even though it may advocate a particular position
- creating talking points, one-pagers, and other written materials for congressional and agency leaders
- providing Congress with analysis of important legislative drafts quickly and making specific requests from Congress for assistance
- participating in informational panels and roundtables and meeting with key congressional members and their staff.

Advocacy Takeaways

Based on our work with professional societies and 501(c)(3) organizations, there are several consistent takeaways for associations to remember:

- Methodical, well-prepared organizations can make a difference.
- Professional societies can impact legislation. It is difficult to change laws, but it can be done.
- Task force efforts help to find real solutions. Advocacy, creativity, responsiveness, and patience can persuade elected officials to support innovative, fact-based solutions.
- Policymakers need associations' expertise. Accurate information and examples for legislators can be powerful tools to affect public policy.

To be successful in advocacy that goes beyond traditional lobbying, organizations must stay focused, utilize their deep knowledge base and broad membership, and remain both extemporaneous and patient as the legislative process unfolds. Most initiatives are multi-year strategies. Impacting public policy doesn't happen overnight.

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