



How small associations can maximize their lobbying clout

Some firms specialize in helping the little guy; but your most effective advocates—especially before lawmakers—are your own members

By William Ehart

Brett Palmer, president of the \$2 million-revenue Small Business Investor Alliance, needed just a little bit of lobbying help last year.

With Congress fighting about the fiscal cliff and tax extenders, SBIA—which represents small private-equity funds—needed another pair of eyes and ears on the Hill.

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While Palmer has a strong government affairs background and HillStaffer has an experienced lobbyist on staff, they can’t be everywhere at once.

“I’ve got only so many arms and legs and mouths to speak with at the same time. Sometimes issues surge and you have lots of different pieces on the board,” Palmer told *CEO Update*. “You need a little intel. This was a nice insurance policy that paid off. It let us be much more effective in our efforts.”

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“For a small association that doesn’t revolve its entire existence around lobbying, the [HillStaffer] model makes sense,” said Palmer. “For us, it’s helpful to augment what we already have.”

Tom Rosenfield, president of HillStaffer, said his company saves small associations money because it doesn’t charge a retainer and only bills for as many hours as clients are willing to pay for. Typical clients pay for about 17 to 18 hours of lobbying representation per month for a bill of between \$2,500 and \$3,500, he said. HillStaffer employs a network of semiretired former Capitol Hill aides on a project basis.

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Palmer

Form a GR Committee

To galvanize and focus member energies—and respond quickly to threats and opportunities—an association can form a government relations committee, said Jeanne Sheehy, executive director of the \$600K-revenue Tile Roofing Institute. Sheehy also is vice president and chief marketing officer of Chicago-based association management company Bostrom.

That’s what TRI did when it realized it was missing out on a green tax credit that was available to customers of its asphalt and metal roofing competitors.

The committee was composed of technical experts from member companies. It contacted all of TRI’s major manufacturers and got maps of plant locations so that certain congressional districts could be targeted, and made a list of all employees who had congressional contacts.

That was work they could do themselves, so that by the time they did hire a lobbyist on monthly retainer, he was able to hit the ground running, Sheehy said. TRI devoted about 12 percent of its budget to the overall lobbying effort.

TRI has so far been unable to get tile roofs included in the tax credit—but with a committee in place earlier, success would have been more likely.

“We were late in the game,” Sheehy acknowledged.

“Had we had this effort going earlier we wouldn’t have gotten behind. We should have done this five years before.”

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