

# **Assess Your Government Relations Program to Maximize Impact**



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**One of the most important exercises an association GR team can perform is a strategic assessment of its ability to achieve**

## **desired advocacy results. The evaluation will likely reveal whether the organization is equipped to make an impact.**

With the 2018 midterm elections behind us, now is an ideal time to assess whether your government relations program has the resources it needs to achieve desired goals, whether your focus is the U.S. Congress, the state legislatures, or both. Your GR priorities support the organizational mission and strategic plan, so ensuring you have adequate assets is essential to success.

### **Inventory Your Assets**

While associations routinely evaluate ROI for other activities, government relations is often overlooked. That's a mistake. Instead, take stock of your government relations capabilities every year, realistically assessing both organizational resources and department capabilities.

Start by reviewing the organization's operating expenses, budgets, and reserves. Does it have the ability to fund new initiatives? Is there potential to raise new revenues through new funding sources?

Next, assess the people resources, starting with your association's staff. Do they have sufficient bandwidth and the right expertise? Your members are another important asset. Have you surveyed them lately, and are you tapping volunteer leaders to assist in advocacy work? Also consider the quality of your relationships with government decision makers.

It's also important to review the strength of your association's message. What is the external perception of your industry and members? The strength of your image affects the resources required to develop your message and achieve your advocacy goals. Issues surrounding children and veterans, for instance, are generally viewed favorably and often provide added flexibility with resources compared to, say, advocacy for groups perceived to have a negative impact on the environment.

Consider what tactics and tools the coming year's strategy will require that aren't already in place. Think about the roadblocks that you and your team ran into in the past and make adjustments. Perhaps this is the time to add a new component to your GR technology, revamp your Capitol Hill Day structure, provide professional development training to an eager staffer, or renegotiate a contract.

## **Create a Culture of Advocacy**

Creating a culture of advocacy may be the most underdeveloped aspect of a government relations strategy.

Advancing your association's mission often requires advocacy to remove threats or promote positive solutions and policies. A successful GR program can provide some of the highest value to your members and greatest return on investment to the association.

Although creating a culture of advocacy should be part of your organization's core values and mission, it takes time. As with all values, GR should be fundamental to the decisions, actions, and commitment of the board and senior staff. This leadership behavior will provide a standard that other volunteers, members, and staff expect and emulate. A positive culture of advocacy creates value and instills a sense of pride to members.

## **Leverage Other In-House Resources**

You and your colleagues in other departments are all serving the same members, so it makes sense to align activities, create synergies, and strengthen member value.

When colleagues don't understand what you do or how you do it, you miss out on the chance to get closer to meeting your goals. Correct this with some simple education. Hold a lunch-and-learn to talk about your role and how government relations provides member value. Then learn more about what your colleagues do. Identify data gaps, technology challenges, or communication shortcomings that need to be resolved.

Your membership and component relations staff probably know your members best. Make sure they are familiar with the policy issues you are working on and why they are important to current and potential members. Share successes that have been meaningful to your cause. These can be useful in recruiting new members.

Help the staff understand your desire to engage members; they already know that engagement is a proven retention strategy. Discuss the types and levels of engagement that can move government relations efforts forward, such as grassroots and “grass tops” engagement with policymakers.

Your membership and technology staff can be helpful when you want to use data to support your policy positions. Your association likely has developed a robust database. The more these staff know about your needs, the better they can help to collect and evaluate data relevant to your advocacy work.

Another place to look for synergies is your communications department. These experts are responsible for spreading the word about your association to multiple audiences. As they are creating and refining messages, they can target relevant audiences with GR information via traditional and digital channels. They can also help you fine-tune your materials to ensure they are consistent with the association’s brand.

## **Enhance External Relationships**

Coalitions have always been a practical method for raising the collective voice for your issue as well as broadening your reach to policymakers. But they are meant to be temporary. Assess the various coalitions your organization has been active in and consider whether all are still relevant to your GR priorities.

Brainstorm about new partners that might be interested in working together on your priority issues. Consider using the power of celebrity to further your cause. A high-profile ally can open doors, especially with leadership offices, and attract media attention.

Search online for information about your issues of interest and note who is being affected and quoted. Make time to meet with these stakeholders to discuss common interests and ways to collaborate.

Underestimating the power of a mission-driven, adequately resourced government relations program weakens member value. If you've taken stock of your existing and potential resources and believe you've come up short, make it a priority to institute change. As you move forward, continue to self-evaluate. Soon, you'll see member pride, appreciation, and engagement soar.

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