



Selling Advocacy as a Members-Only Benefit

I have recently seen articles by so called association gurus and leaders implying that issue advocacy is not “sellable” and that it is “nonsense” to try to convince a person to pay money to join an organization to get what they are already getting.

My AMC runs two trade associations that are heavily regulated and heavily involved in government advocacy work. We have numerous members who state that our advocacy work is the main reason they joined and continue to support us. And our membership in both continues to grow, despite a weak construction market over the past five years.

I agree with the basic concept that advocacy efforts do benefit the entire industry and not just members, but would make these two points:

First, the IRS grants non-profit status to organizations whose work benefits a “common business interest” and its activities “must be directed towards the improvement of business conditions.” In other words, your organization must benefit all, not just members only. Now, to paraphrase a quote from the Godfather “Certainly we can present a bill for such services; after all, we are not Communists.” And that’s where I believe people who espouse this view miss the mark, leading to my second point: You can promote advocacy as a member-only benefit depending on how you deliver and sell it.

If your organization identifies harmful legislation, rallies the troops to kill the bill, then sends out an announcement proclaiming your victory, then yes, I’d concur that your advocacy work benefited non- members and it would be difficult to entice membership under those circumstances. But what if you sent out an announcement to members and prospects saying you have identified a bill that would cause harm to the industry and wanted to have a meeting to discuss your industry’s strategy on how to deal with the issue? You could then provide a link to the issue and the meeting information – surprise – on your members’ only pages. You could also set up a meeting with the policy maker and ask for the industry’s participation to help shape the regulations that govern their own businesses.

Maybe you only invite members. The meeting notes are distributed only to members. Your industry members would have advance notice on issues that impact their business and thus have more time to prepare and react than non-members. You are selling a competitive advantage, you are selling them time and convenience and you are packaging useful information in a manner that is convenient and easy for your members to digest and understand. That’s valuable! We frequently prepare annual government affairs reports and summaries and guess what? Only our members get them.

My organization is also not shy about asking non-members to chip in and share the actual costs of hiring outside lobbyists or consultants when needed. Maybe XYZ company doesn’t want to join, and that’s ok. But if presented with a real business threat or opportunity and a shared funding plan, they might consider chipping in. I can’t tell you how many times a non-member has emailed about a specific meeting or call regarding an issue and asked if



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“they could just sit in on it.” We typically tell them yes, it’s free for members but non-members have to pay a registration fee. They complain but who cares – they’re not members!

So the next time someone tells you that advocacy has no member value, ask them to read through a 100-page regulation and boil it down to a one page fact sheet for you!

