

Defending Your Industry: How To Advocate In Challenging Times



Association chapters play a crucial role in advocating for the longevity of their industries. This is true both in times of uncertainty, whether because of economic downturns, legislative changes or global crises, as well as when things are going well.



Many people think of chapter advocacy as predominantly focused on lobbying government officials for change — that is a big piece of it, but it's much more. The advocacy done by association chapters is about raising awareness, fostering community (and community support) and ensuring those in your industry have the resources they need to succeed and navigate any challenges. It's a powerful tool that can help you shape chapter policies, amplify your members' voices and positively influence decision makers at all levels.

Why consider advocacy in chapter initiatives?

There are many benefits to making advocacy part of the work of an association chapter. The one you're probably familiar with is how advocacy helps ensure concerns in your industry are amplified at the local, state and/or national levels.

But there are countless other benefits to chapter advocacy, including how it:

- Helps chapters establish reputations as thought leaders, shape industry standards, contribute to discussions and build credibility with stakeholders
- Gets (and keeps) members involved in a chapter, when they see the chapter is actively working to protect and promote their interests
- Gives members a cause to unite behind while also strengthening their connection to the organization.

Here are three important ways you can expand and improve your chapter advocacy initiatives, to create an organized program that meets the goals you set for it.

3 ways to improve chapter advocacy

1. **Define your advocacy focus areas and how you'll know you've been successful.** You may think that it's important to focus on chapter finances and education. And you could be right. Or there could be other issues affecting your industry and/or distressing your members, like unexpected layoffs and changes to healthcare. Here are some questions you can ask, in meetings, focus groups and in email, to help jumpstart the discussion and help clarify what you should focus on.

- What challenges or threats is your industry currently facing?
- Who or what is driving these challenges, and what are their main arguments?
- How have these threats impacted your industry?
- How do you currently engage policymakers, stakeholders, or the public in your advocacy efforts? How should these efforts change?
- How can those in your industry present a stronger, unified voice?
- How will you know your efforts have been successful and how will you measure that success? Is it the number of people who sign your petition or something bigger, like a policy change?

2. **Provide clear messaging and documentation.** Once you know where you want to focus your chapter advocacy, it should be as easy as possible for those who will carry out your plan to do their jobs. For many this will be the first time they've done this type of work, so create a packet that includes things like:

- a. A definition of the audience – who will they be speaking to?
- b. The goal of the advocacy



- c. Messaging that explains the cause and relates it to the people they'll be speaking with
- d. Clear steps – what should they be doing, in what order and by when?
- e. Resources, like:
 - i. Links to articles that explain the cause
 - ii. True stories that share the message and importance of this advocacy
 - iii. Links to social media posts, sign up forms, petitions, etc.
 - iv. Easy-to-follow templates
- f. The appeal – what do you want these members to accomplish? Should they get a certain number of signatures on your petition, share your posts or help spread the word about the issue?

3. **Determine your channels.** Of course, you need to share your message by getting in front of the right people and talking to them, but combining this in-person approach with online communication channels can get you in front of many more people. Electronic media often allows you to provide details and specifics that your members may not remember to include in their conversations, while giving you the chance to provide links to materials. A successful blended chapter advocacy communications plan should combine in-person communications with content on your chapter's website as well as in your electronic communications, like email and chapter newsletters. Create a page on your website for your advocacy work, send emails with creative; direct subject lines that engage readers while staying out of Spam; and utilize your social media to share videos and links to additional information. And to engage members further, consider using your member portal for detailed and sometimes delicate conversations that you probably don't want to have in public.

Getting ready and executing a strong association chapter advocacy program means giving those who will be doing the work the tools, resources and confidence they need to engage with policymakers, educate their communities and drive meaningful change.

