

Pandemic Public Affairs: Lessons and Insights

By Seth Palmer

For almost a year, we have all been dealing with a challenge for which none of us were prepared. Only a handful of organizational crisis plans had a "global pandemic" section, and they were likely just before the section on alien attacks. This has meant that many of us, even in the communications industry, have had to scramble, applying existing principles and narratives to an evolving and unknown situation. Phrases like "new normal," "social distancing," and "the three Ws" have become commonplace in our writing, and Zoom meetings and work-from-home have become our daily lives.

As associations, you have been at the tip of the spear, addressing the challenges facing tens of thousands of people across our state. They are your members, your friends, our neighbors, and the backbone of our state's economy. Many of them have put themselves directly in harm's way because of their role and duty of service. The responsibility has fallen on you to do your best to serve their needs and represent their issues in the halls of government and on Main Street. And you have accomplished your goals admirably in light of everything going on, and your members appreciate your efforts.

While it is still uncertain when or if the world will return to what it was, some lessons can be immediately applied to your engagement with your members on public affairs (i.e., advocacy) topics.

Building a Permission Structure for "business as usual"

No, this is not intended to imply that your organization should return truly to "business as usual," but rather to show a communications presence that shows that things can continue. They will look different from what they did in previous years, but they aren't substantively different. Let's look at an example:

Political Action Committees, or PACs, are a vital tool in the political process for associations of all sizes. They are a part of an organization's voice by giving its members the chance to collectively contribute to elected officials or candidates who support issues important to the association. But it is understandably challenging to ask members for PAC investment in a time of economic uncertainty. To help communicate the value of your PAC is to help create a permission structure by which members recognize the value of their investment to the overall advocacy efforts of the association. Though the investments may be less, giving members the ability to participate in some way with the organization's efforts.

This permission structure can be applied to other association operations, especially those changed in light of the circumstances. But it is crucial that this permission structure not be used to press members farther than they are comfortable.

Power of collective voices

The adage that one voice can yell across a room but thousands of voices can yell across the state is no less powerful today than it was when we could gather in person. Associations are built on the power of members, and now you must do your best to leverage it to your advantage. Though physically disconnected, you are still able to engage your members to speak out on important topics. You can gather the voices of hundreds or even thousands of members and direct them to your target audience through the use of technology. From one elected official to the entire General Assembly's membership, you can use various platforms to provide their constituents and your members' perspective. If your members aren't able to take their voices physically to Jones Street, you can help them send them virtually.

You can also bring Jones Street to your members virtually as well. Legislators from every district have used technology like Zoom to connect with people in their district, so use that to your advantage. Host a virtual Town Hall with legislators and invite the members from their district. If you have local chapters or organizations, ask them to collaborate and help co-host the event. Use these opportunities in the same way you would an in-person day at the legislature. Show elected officials the power of your organization and show your members that your organization can directly connect them with those who need to hear their voice.

Take a breath

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped our country in many ways that we are still realizing. So as the guidance from the World War II British advertisement told us to— keep calm and carry on. These are challenging times, and you must take a moment for calm whenever possible. This is not unique to public affairs, but frankly, to life in general. While you may have to respond immediately to a crisis, there is value in not engaging in every issue as soon as you receive it. Pausing to collect your thoughts and devise an answer is just as valuable in a disconnected environment as it was in a connected one.

While none of us have an idea what the next few days, weeks, or even months to come, the value of your engagement on behalf of your members cannot be understated and should be supported in any way that it can.

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