

Public Policy & Advocacy

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An effective legislative or government affairs program is one of the strongest benefits your chamber of commerce can provide your members. No other organization in your community represents such a broad base of business constituents. Because of this your chamber can command the attention of elected officials when speaking on behalf of business. Even more importantly, the number and variety of businesses in your chamber can have a direct impact on how your local, county and state officials vote. If you don't represent your members on important business issues, who will? Whether they are vocal about it or not, your members expect you to represent their interests on local and state issues.

Building a Legislative Agenda

Survey

A survey of chamber members can give you some insight to your member's views and help you decide what issues really matter to your chamber members. One method is to list local, county, state and/or federal issues and ask you members to rank the top three in each category. For assistance in defining state issues, contact the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. For a federal issue agenda, contact the US Chamber of Commerce. The survey will provide your committee a starting point and help prioritize issues. The survey may also assist you in recruiting committee members.

Recruit Committee Members

The overall goal of a chamber's government affairs activities is to represent the business community. Your committee members should accurately represent your business members. While your chamber membership may include non-profit agencies, the school district, the city, individuals and elected officials, these representatives should not dominate the composition of your committee, and may not need to serve on the committee at all. Remember, they can be called in at any time as resources for your committee. Good prospects for committee members include manufacturers (all sizes) and public affairs representatives from your larger companies as well as retailers and various other industries. The important factor is your members' interest in the issues and their commitment to a business agenda.

Develop a Mission of Focus

~~With the results of the membership survey, your committee needs to establish a mission of focus and a clear process for establishing chamber positions. Underneath the overall mission of the committee will fall the specific goals for the committee.~~ Determine a process for establishing policy positions and who can voice that position. Many Chambers leave the final decision on policy positions with their Board of Directors after receiving a recommendation from the government affairs committee. A local chamber's government affairs program may focus on local, county, state and/or federal issues. The priority of issues usually falls in the same order.

Local issues **are often most important.** A school bond referendum or a franchise fee proposed by the city council will have a clear consequence for your member and the whole community. Most local chambers are heavily involved in local issues, even if they don't have a structured government affairs program. **This is where you can provide your members a voice.**

State legislative issues seem a little more distant and many of your members may feel they have little impact on the state legislative process. Your members, however, can have significant impact on your local legislators. With local chambers across the state influencing local legislators, local chambers collectively have tremendous influence on the state legislature.

Consider joining a statewide coalition, such as the Minnesota Chamber Federation. Led by the Minnesota Chamber, the Federation unites local chambers from across the state on key business issues. Priorities are identified in December, and clearly identify the pros and cons for business. Together, these chambers produce one voice for business on key issues.

Your local legislators will look to you for information and advice on business issues if you can demonstrate your chamber's ability to provide it. Many chambers with strong government affairs programs will have legislators calling them regularly during the session – asking the chamber's view on specific issues.

Your committee may choose to influence federal officials on one or two priorities. The U.S. Chamber can assist you in identifying issues in which your elected official may be a major player.

Prioritize Issues

A local chamber cannot be effective on a whole range of issues due to limited resources. The legislative committee needs to focus most of its efforts on a small group of issues. For example, the committee may choose three local issues, three state issues and one federal issue on which to focus its energies. Ideally, your government affairs committee members will also participate in a Minnesota Chamber of Commerce's policy development session and help set statewide issue priorities. These regional meetings are typically conducted throughout the state in June.

Develop Policy Positions

To effectively influence your elected officials, your committee should develop positions on the major issues you are advocating. Choose your issues with care and determine how to respond to objections. First, develop a policy statement. The Minnesota Chamber's positions can be a starting point for board approval on state issues. Next develop talking points that relate to the policy statement. These positions should be communicated to the members and to your local legislators. Ask your legislators to respond to the positions.

Sometimes it may not be easy to take a clear position on an issue, particularly if it is divisive locally. If the business community is clearly divided, then perhaps no position should be taken, and the committee may just monitor the issue providing a conduit of information to the membership.

Timing

Your government affairs committee will focus on local issues as they develop in your community. City and county issues can arise at any time throughout the year. It is easier to plan for state legislative issues however, because the Minnesota Legislature meets in the winter and spring of each year. Before an upcoming legislative session, your position should be developed and discussed with your legislators throughout the fall. Likewise, reinforce your message by participating in town hall meetings when legislators are in district. It is especially important to obtain legislators' commitment on issues prior to the beginning of the session, and in election years, prior to the election.

Track Issues

A local issue is generally easy to track. This can be achieved through attendance at city council or county board meetings and through articles in the local paper. The Minnesota Chamber can assist your committee in tracking state issues and the same is true for the U.S. Chamber at the federal level. It is important to know the status of your key issues to determine when the influence and action of your members will make an impact.

Influencing Elected Officials by Developing Relationships

Your efforts to influence elected officials will be much more effective if a positive relationship already exists between the two parties. Establish open communications with them, and identify and engage members who can help. **Often, legislators and local officials are members of the local chamber. If they are not, you may want to include them on your mailing list so they are aware of the chamber activities and positions on issues.**

Build strong relationships with local elected officials and administrators. Be keenly aware of who you are representing – your business members. Research and understand the issues and their impact on business. Be present and accessible. This can be achieved through regular, perhaps monthly or quarterly meetings with local officials. Attendance at city council and county board meetings will also demonstrate your commitment to monitoring issues and building relationships. Recognize and thank them when they listen and vote for business.

Informal lunch or coffee meetings between you, key members, and your legislator to discuss general issues is also helpful. ~~While developing the relationship, you may not want to ask for anything specific.~~ Concentrate on opening the lines of communication and making everyone comfortable. Later roundtable discussions on specific issues can provide your members an opportunity to voice their support or share their concerns on pending legislation, as well as provide valuable input as to the effect it might have on their business.

At the conclusion of the legislative session, your committee should evaluate how well your legislator represented your policy positions and the needs of your community. Monitoring the effectiveness of elected officials at all levels of government is an on-going process and voting records are one tool. The Minnesota Chamber compiles voting records on key business issues at the conclusion of each session that your committee can use to share with your membership.

Thank and recognize legislators who support your issues and vote the way your members ask them. Likewise, express your disappointment to those legislators who do not support your issues. Ask them for an explanation. Brief op-ed's in your local newspaper can accomplish this recognition.

Political Action Committees

The formation of a political action committee (PAC) provides the ability to play a role in electing like-minded policy makers. Political action works best in chambers whose primary purpose is to be a business advocate. If your chamber sees itself as a community coalition builder or if the chamber's budget is dependent on city, county or state government grant money or contracts – a political action committee might not be for your chamber.

Organizations such as chambers of commerce are prohibited from contributing dues income to candidates. A PAC can raise personal contributions from members to contribute to political candidates – no corporate money can be used. If you are considering forming a PAC, consult an attorney knowledgeable in state and federal election law.

Examples of Government Affairs Programs

Legislative Breakfasts or Eggs n' Issues

Legislative Breakfasts, Eggs n' Issues or other similar meetings provide the opportunity for you to educate your members about important issues. Often, the speakers at these events are local legislators or legislative leadership. Your committee should provide specific questions for the legislator to address on particular issues.. Many local chambers hold these meetings on a regular basis while the legislature is in session. If you want to raise the visibility of business issues,

Day at the Capitol

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce coordinates a statewide Business Day at the Capitol. Local chambers and trade associations join together to unite in one large event making a strong impact in one day. When well planned, these events are not only an effective lobbying tool, but are a valuable experience for members.

Candidate Forums

Local chambers of commerce often provide forums for their members to meet and question candidates seeking local or state offices. While local chambers do not actively become involved in campaigns or endorse candidates (unless they have a Political Action Committee), they provide the opportunity for members to make informed decisions at the polls.

Candidate questionnaires

As a part of the election process, local chambers should ask the candidates their positions on issues important to the business community. The purpose of questioning candidates is two-fold, to determine if the candidate is supportive of the chamber's position, and secondly, to obtain their commitment on the issues prior to the beginning of the legislative session.

Political Education Programs

A few local chambers organize programs (e.g. Candidate 101) to identify and inform potential candidates for office, and encourage business people to run for office. Political education programs can also educate business leaders on their relationship with government and how government works and how business can impact it.

Newsletter or e-mail communications

Several chambers produce a newsletter informing their members on the progress of their legislative agenda items. They may also track voting records, and report how local and key legislators voted on these business priorities. An e-newsletter works well and is easy for members to scroll through issues that are important to their business.

Legislative Kick-Off's and/or Legislative Wrap-Up Sessions

Many chambers of commerce commence the start of a legislative session with a legislative kick-off event for chamber members and/or the community at-large. This event informs the membership and legislators of the priorities of the chamber of commerce prior to the start of the legislative session and also informs attendees where legislators plan to weigh in on the issues. Likewise, a legislative wrap-up session has local legislators explain the results of legislative session and the outcome of the issues affecting business. By including the media, you can raise the visibility of business issues and their importance to economic development and job creation. Remember to focus on business priorities.

Trip to Washington D.C.

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Executives (MCCE) sponsors a trip to Washington D.C. each year. The three day trip features individual meetings with members of the Minnesota congressional delegation, a special briefing from a U.S. agency, and a briefing at the White House and the U.S. Chamber.

Resources/Contacts

Minnesota Chamber of Commerce

The Minnesota Chamber can provide “hands on” assistance in developing and enhancing a government affairs program. Members of the staff are available to meet with and/or speak to your membership on specific issues. Material available from the Minnesota Chamber include state issue positions, legislative alerts, voting records and other supporting information.

Contact: Jennifer Byers
Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
400 Robert Street North, Suite 1500
St. Paul, MN 55101
Phone: 651.292.4650 or 800.821.2230
fax 651.292.4656
www.mnchamber.com

US Chamber of Commerce

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce can also provide assistance in developing a government affairs program. Minnesota is in the Midwest region and the U.S. Chamber regional office provides issue information and monitoring on federal issues.

Contact: Doug Loon, Vice President
Midwest Regional Office
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
5300 Hyland Greens Drive, Suite 220
Minneapolis, MN 55437-3933
Phone: 952-832-9151
Fax: 952-832-9454
www.uschamber.com

Minnesota Taxpayers Association

The Minnesota Taxpayers Association is a non-partisan organization focusing on taxation and spending in Minnesota government.

Contact: Lynn Reed, Executive Director
Minnesota Taxpayers Association
85 East 7th Street, Suite 250
St. Paul, MN 55101
Phone: (651) 224-7477
Fax: (651) 224-1209
www.mntax.org

American Chamber of Commerce Executives

ACCE is a nationwide association of chamber executives. The organization hosts an annual government affairs conference and offers a number of publications.

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