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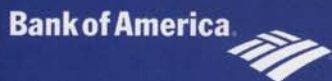
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e-Lobbying is e-efficient

Mobilizing your grassroots advocacy network online

By now you may have already heard about the Long Beach (CA) Area Chamber of Commerce's new advocacy web site. The site, www.LongBeachAdvocacy.biz, allows them to alert and mobilize their membership on relevant legislative issues.

Built entirely in-house by chamber staff and totally separate from the chamber's main site, the Long Beach advocacy site is considered a first in the chamber world. But it certainly won't be the last. Many chambers throughout the country have taken to e-lobbying in a big way. They, and their affiliates, recognize the value of providing legislative tracking, updates, and lobbying capabilities via the web.

"It's by far the most effective means I've yet found for communicating with legislative and regulatory bodies," says **Jim Berg**, formerly of both the **Business Council of New York State** and the **Adirondack Regional Chamber of Commerce**, now a consultant.

You Don't Have to Go It Alone

If a chamber doesn't have the time or expertise to build its own advocacy web site, there are capabilities and tools available on the web that allow chambers to actively maintain a government relations presence in their community through e-lobbying. One company that offers these services is PinPoint Communication Group of Troy, NY. They emphasize the speed and efficiency of their technology.

"Fundamentally, it's an online grassroots lobbying application on steroids—that's what we like to call it," says **Stan Wright**, President of PinPoint. "Our main objective is to get the supporter (the letter writer) in and out of the application in three minutes."

Most web-based advocacy applications fundamentally work the same way. The chamber creates a series of questions related to the issue they are advocating. Supporters log on to answer these

questions. This allows the chamber to get feedback on the value of the supporter's membership or to follow up with them regarding membership.

More immediately, the personal responses become the key points of a customized letter from the chamber supporter that is sent to legislators urging their attention to the matter. PinPoint's technology can accommodate unlimited customized letters. These are selected at random to prevent government officials from receiving exactly the same letter. Supporters only have to type in their zip code to produce a list of government officials who should receive their correspondence.

It's All in Your Control

One of the major components of an effective e-lobbying site is control. The chamber should determine where letters are sent and, for the most part, what they say. The supporter simply enters his or her information and the letter is generated for them. The supporter has a chance to approve the letter before it is sent out, but can't edit its content. The reason comes down to one word: fraud.

"The chamber manages everything," says Wright. "There is an option that allows you to lock a letter once it's generated and before it's sent. We strongly recommend this function. Because the letter is positioned as correspondence on behalf of the chamber, it's best that they have control of the letter. Otherwise, opponents of your positions could edit and send out letters on your behalf that could undermine or discredit your efforts. I've seen it happen."

Chambers can use the application to send faxes or emails. Wright recommends faxes over emails, since congressional offices are overwhelmed with emails and faxes generate instant hard copies.

"When the state legislators call up and say 'stop, you're jamming our machine,'



you know you've made an impact," says Berg. "And with any lobbying effort aimed at the legislature in New York, you not only have the legislators themselves but the ability to communicate with all the various committee chairman and regulators that have input on the legislation or 'rule' changes. Thanks to our e-lobbying tools, we literally stormed the beaches on several occasions."

Getting Out the Vote

Using a similar product called *Voter Voice*, the **Oklahoma State Chamber** urged its members to notify their state legislators and voice their approval of a Right to Work bill before the assembly. The result was more than 15,000 e-mails and faxes calling the state lawmakers to action.

Each member of the State Chamber's network is matched with his or her legislator and given an option to compose an e-mail message for the appropriate elected official. If the Chamber member's e-mail is not available or is returned undeliverable, a fax is automatically sent.

What the Future Holds

According to Wright, there are some notable advancements in technology related to e-lobbying on the horizon. Soon, chambers will be integrating e-lobbying efforts with membership management systems so they can track their most active members. Plus, with the advent of wireless approval of letters, chamber members can accept or reject letters on their behalf through their cell phones or palm pilots.

Whatever new applications become a reality, you can be sure that chambers will use them to their advantage. □

—Greg Roth