For many associations, DEI is only skin deep. Is yours ready to turn words into actions?
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LET'S GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT
The most effective digital advocacy strategies involve associations saying less and letting members do the talking.

By Thomas Marcetti

Turns out the thing holding back our digital advocacy efforts might be us. Whether it’s working with legislators, increasing public awareness and understanding of your industry, providing educational and professional development for your members, or addressing social issues, your association is deeply involved in advocacy.
Arguably, advocacy is the sole reason many associations exist.

“But wait,” you’re thinking. “Didn’t he say we’re holding back advocacy?”

Yes. Yes, he did.

According to Nielsen, 84% of consumers value recommendations from friends and family above all forms of marketing or communication from brands. That’s good and bad news. The good is obvious (hopefully). The good news is you have a whole bunch of families and friends you’re already in regular contact with: your members.

The most successful digital advocacy strategies are the ones that shift the spotlight from the association to empower and encourage members to carry the message.

“Some associations freak out too much about social media, assume it’s a magic bullet that will solve everything,” says Becca Bycott, director of thought leadership and engagement at FiscalNote. “Associations waste time demanding that something be posted or tweeted sometimes without thinking about if the message will really work. That’s why community management is so important. Crowdsourcing, listening to your audiences and being responsive, and enlisting the help of your best, most digitally savvy advocates to share your news and chime in on your behalf are crucial to the success of your message.”

Especially the past 30-something years this pandemic has been going on (or feels like it’s been going on), Robb Lee, chief marketing and communications officer of ASAE, says underneath the surface, everyone is evaluating their value proposition and their values. Associations can re-affirm what values they represent if they have the strategy.

“Ultimately, stakeholders come to associations because they are looking for community, support, professional development, and leadership,” Lee says. “Leadership means showing the way forward. It means pushing the envelope. You don’t want to go too far ahead and leave people behind, but if you don’t push ahead, you’ll be left behind.”

Engage With Them

I may have been a little harsh before. I’m not saying associations should step back completely. It is crucial for associations to maintain their voices, be thought leaders, and be the bedrock of digital advocacy.

But we do need to shift our efforts, and that starts with changing the way we reach our audiences.

One of the great things about digital campaigns is the ease of true engagement. As Eric Blinderman, senior director of communications for Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, points out, our intended audiences no longer need to jump through hoops to reach us.

“Gone are the days of dueling, one-way messages,” Blinderman says. “The organizations that win are those that can engage their audiences in meaningful, authentic, and real-time conversations. Lose the idea that one-way, cold messages will hit the target and succeed. Audiences today expect the right to have a voice, and it’s vital to offer them just that.”

Lee notes that with the need for a new approach to communication, digital also brings significantly more tools to find out what people need and how best to get it to them.

“We’re at a point in time that we can address individual needs in a way we haven’t before,” Lee says. “Marketing used to be just segmentation and assumptions. Now it can be based on behaviors. We can look at what you do and serve your expectations.”

The success of remote work this past year and a half has changed how organizations operate, Lee says. With so many organizations seeing increases in productivity and morale, it’s changed people’s perceptions of what digital engagement can accomplish.

Now, I don’t think any of us are ready to even float the idea of more Zoom meetings. But the possibilities for personal, authentic digital interaction are huge.

“Think about the Ice Bucket Challenge and things like that. There’s more of a personal trend happening right now

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where people are getting very direct and personal via live video on Instagram, vlogging, blogging, etc., that non-profits and associations are still catching up to,” Bycott says. “This kind of one-on-one communication is something we should explore more by featuring the people who make up our organization and its impact.”

Advocacy efforts vary wildly from association to association. For some, it is deadly serious. But that doesn’t mean the messaging has to be.

“There are those who believe that video content is not serious enough to deliver an advocacy-related campaign message,” Blinderman says. “Let’s not forget that we’re all human, and that even the most sobering of advocacy issues can be delivered with personality and a human touch. We just need to be mindful of tone and content.”

With so many options for media type and delivery platforms, associations can take a range of tones and approaches to the same message. In fact, knowing who you’ll be reaching and how to approach them in each case is critical, Bycott says.

“Many of our members are highly engaged Facebook users, but our younger advocates and emerging professionals tend to be more active on Instagram,” she says. “We have a strong contingent of amazing fellowships and grants alumnae who are active on Twitter and LinkedIn. I try to tailor our content based on where I know I’ll reach the right audience, based on how well people respond to something and the metrics of the platform, which help me track engagement.”

Empower their Voices

Once the conversation really gets going, when members know you value their voices, some will begin to advocate for you on their own. And that’s great. Your superfans will do a lot of work for you. Consider their reach.

Estimates vary, but groups like SocialToaster say that across all their platforms and memberships, the average internet user has more than 600 personal connections. So just 10 superfan advocates can easily boost your message to 6,000 more sets of eyes, ears, or other sensory receptors. (Scratch and sniff social media? Maybe someday.)

Right. So superfans are great. Make sure they know you see and appreciate them. But what we really want is 500 people boosting your message. That’s 300,000 sets of sensory receptors. Now we’re talking.

This is where you are the bedrock. You are going to empower them.

Sometimes, this will be as simple as just asking people to share your content. It works. But to go big with this, you need to give them the tools.

“Members are often really eager to help an organization but might need guidance from us on how to participate in a digital campaign, for example. They might appreciate trainings,” Bycott says. “With the right outreach, getting members’ involvement as advocates with their own robust networks can be really creative and cool.”

Member media kits and fact sheets are also a great way to give people ideas on how to advocate for you. Though, again, these tools should be jargon free and written like a real person — everything press releases and email blasts are not.

In addition to increasing the reach of your message, personal advocacy campaigns can be a two-way content street, especially with crowdsourcing. These types of campaigns should be at the heart of your content strategy, Bycott says. They create connection and buy-in, and are an excellent way to see where your members are and what they need.

While working at the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, she created a crowdsourcing campaign called ExchangeOurWorld. It started with launching an Instagram account called Exchange Our World and the hashtag, and grew into a thriving, ongoing outreach.

“It became this digital presence of all things ECA, a hashtag that lived on every social media platform and created this thread of conversation about exchange programs that everyone could create and share,” Bycott says. “Embassies use it, program partners use it. We used it for crowdsourcing and community management all the time, and it led to us finding some terrific stories.”
In addition to campaigns of this kind, many apps and platforms now make it incredibly easy for your audience to send you short videos or audio clips. This allows you to quickly gather your members’ voices and testimonials to use in your videos, podcasts, and as embeds in newsletters or marketing material.

Done right, video and audio can make your those members will share the content. It’s also a great way to show your advocates that you see and appreciate them.

Aside from boosting your message, turning your members into advocates can also boost your brand. I know that segue caused a lot of eyes to glaze over. But bear with me.

More and more, organizations are sinking or swimming on what they noticeably stand for. People can only form opinions based on what they can see. With so many association member benefits behind paywalls, your advocacy might be the only thing potential members, donors, or advertisers see of you.

How well your advocacy message is spread might end up being the deciding factor in whether you can keep the lights on.

“Your current and future stakeholders are changing,” Lee says. “For some associations, the bottom might not be dropping out. They might be able to get away with being silent for now because of where their membership is, but that won’t last. Look at retail. Thousands of brands disappear each year because they didn’t adapt.”

Thomas Marcetti is associate editor of Signature. He can be reached at thomas@kalimedia if any investors are interested in scratch-and-sniff social media.
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