

FIRST STEPS TO EU ENGAGEMENT FOR ASSOCIATIONS

MOST TRADE AND PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS HAVE AMONGST THEIR KEY OBJECTIVE TO INFLUENCE POLICY OR REPRESENT THE INTERESTS OF THEIR INDUSTRY/ PROFESSION VIS-À-VIS PUBLIC BODIES AND GOVERNMENTS. YET MANY ASSOCIATIONS HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO MOVE THIS GOAL FROM MISSION STATEMENT INTO ACTION PLAN. BUDGET CONCERNS OR LACK OF KNOWLEDGE REGARDING THE STRATEGY ARE OFTEN THE REASON.

Many European trade and professional associations have EU engagement as an objective but don't know how and where to start. Congrex Belgium's Michiel Gen (Association Manager) explains that EU engagement doesn't have to mean expensive lobbying. The following will assist in understanding the first steps towards exerting influence in an effective yet affordable way by tapping into the expertise of the membership base

and volunteer leadership. Moreover, it is an excellent way to add to an association's member value proposition.

BRUSSELS DECIDES

It is estimated that between 60% and 80% of the legislation that currently affects professionals and businesses throughout Europe is decided in Brussels: industry standards, pharmaceuticals, competition, trade, funding of scientific research, clinical trials, environ-

A portrait of Michiel Gen, a man with glasses, wearing a dark pinstriped suit, a white shirt, and a blue patterned tie. He is standing with his arms crossed and a slight smile. The name 'Michiel Gen' is written in a light grey font above his left shoulder.

Michiel Gen

YOUR 5 STEPS TO EU ENGAGEMENT

1. Be aware of what's going on by monitoring specialised EU publications but filter out irrelevant information.
2. Identify the key people in the institutions working on issues affecting your members
3. Meet them at an opportune moment
4. Let your members do most of the talking. They are the experts.
5. Make good and timely use of opportunities to give input such as stakeholder consultations and expert groups

ment, professional qualifications, health & safety rules, consumer protection and food safety regulations, etc. For this reason, almost every business sector and many professions are represented in Brussels through a trade or professional association, including hundreds of non-EU interest groups.

MONITORING

Engaging the EU starts by staying abreast of what is going on. The EU frequently adopts new and amends existing legislation. It is therefore important for an organisation to maintain awareness of legislative and policy developments by monitoring relevant EU websites and specialised EU media, as well as to gather information from relevant contacts and through meetings.

Many European associations today are looking to increase their member value proposition. Monitoring and reporting on EU legislation and policy initiatives can add such value, and European associations are best placed to deliver this as opposed to national associations. Information gathered can be fed to members through the association's website, regular newsletters or policy briefs.

OPEN TO EXPERT INPUT

It may seem hard to believe, but the European Commission is a relatively small organisation. With only 25,000 civil servants - fewer than the city of Rotterdam - it drafts legislation that affects 500 million European citizens. Because of its small size, it lacks the necessary expert knowledge on every single regulatory or technical issue. This knowledge gap is filled by associations.

The participation of civil society organisations in the European policy-making process helps address the perceived democratic deficit that still prevails in European integration and adds to the legitimacy of EU legislation and policy. For this reason, EU institutions are extremely open to expert input provided by associations and regularly reach out in so-called stakeholder consultations or green papers. Responding to these opportunities is an easy and inexpensive way to give input from the perspective of an association.

EU officials are broadly familiar with the policy positions of established stakeholders and are constantly seeking input from stakeholders in niche fields of interest that are not yet being heard. This opens opportunities for smaller associations.

LET YOUR MEMBERS DO THE TALKING

Engagement is most effective when your members and volunteer leaders are directly involved. EU officials are very keen to hear from actual practitioners what impact their policies and legislation have in practice. In fact, they prefer to hear this directly from the practitioner rather than through the filter of a lobbyist or association executive. With the right guidance, nobody is better equipped to deliver this practical, technical or academic view than your members. When a piece of legislation or policy that has an impact on your field is being discussed, ask one of your volunteer leaders to come along to the meeting to share their experience. Be sure to tailor the message that you want to deliver and leave behind a document (one page!) containing the key messages that you want

your counterpart to remember. An added benefit of involving members directly is that the membership or volunteer leadership is engaged in a concrete project, building new bonds and loyalties.

EUROPEAN PROJECTS AND EXPERT GROUPS

The European commission frequently calls on external specialists to sit on expert groups or advise as external consultants. The type of expertise may be scientific knowledge and/or knowledge derived from practical experience. This opens up another opportunity for associations. By positioning an Association's people in these roles, they can exert influence through the expertise of its members. The cost of this is negligible for the association as experts generally receive a per diem for their services and expenses. Similar opportunities exist with EU funded projects and thematic networks.

CONCLUSION

Expert input is crucial for sound policies and an association's members can deliver this expertise. Following these steps, an Association will be able to effectively engage the EU without having to hire a lobbyist, driving an association forward and differentiating its services from those of national associations. Providing members with timely and accurate information on changes in EU legislation or EU policies and the impact these may have on the business or profession of members will add significantly to member value proposition. Associations can monitor publications in-house or outsource to an AMC or consultancy with a representation in Brussels. They can, in turn, also advise on the opportune moment to meet with the correct people, providing guidance through the labyrinth in Brussels and Strasbourg - without the massive investment of an expensive lobbyist.

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