

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?



AARON GRAU

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, IIUSA

Trade associations are platforms for debate, resolution, and progress toward a common goal. We should assume, even hope, that not all association members have the exact same point of view. Their diversity, even within the same membership categories, is what creates the most pragmatic solution for everyone involved.

However, the platform must be accessible and once that is established, it creates a strong association that provides members with a qualified support staff and tools to reach understandings and consensus through discussion and cooperation.

Over the last twelve months, IIUSA made great strides asserting itself in critical legislative negotiations; representing the members' interests in the ongoing Regional Center statute reauthorization process.

The association reduced costs and redirected savings to develop a stronger platform. In particular, IIUSA will unveil a completely revised, more accessible, and user-friendly website in 2020. The new website will, among other things, streamline the association's communications with members and non-members, strengthen IIUSA's ability to leverage its grassroots advocacy, and improve members' overall experience within the association's "member portal."

This progress does and will speak for itself, but associations' platforms need more than just great staff and a few tools. So, just as Janet Jackson asked in the 1980s, all association members should always be asking, "What have you done for me lately?"

We have two answers (and counting...): a.) affinity agreements and b.) grassroots guidance.

Affinity agreements are not new to associations, but they are new to IIUSA. The premise is simple: In exchange for the opportunity to market goods or services to IIUSA members by licensing IIUSA's logo and leveraging its membership list, a vendor agrees to become a member of IIUSA and pay IIUSA a royalty fee. Goods and services are provided at a membership rate (a discount) and fees can be paid on a monthly or quarterly basis. Their amount can either be a flat figure or a percentage of the vendors' sales to IIUSA members.

The arrangement can become a significant source of non-dues revenue to IIUSA and a reliable marketing channel for participating vendors. Importantly, the goods and services are limited to those most important or desired by IIUSA members. So, in addition to being a benefit to the vendor and the association, affinity agreements become one more tool members can use on their association's platform.

IIUSA staff invested meaningful time exploring appropriate protocols and legalities of establishing and managing an "affinity program." Specifically, in an effort to maintain the association's tax-exempt status, IIUSA will only seek affinity relationships in which we license our

Continued On Page 37



WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?

Continued From Page 36

intellectual property, i.e. our logo and brand. The association will not actively market an affinity partner's goods or services beyond efforts like facilitating their participation in IIUSA events or listing them as an IIUSA affinity partner. Marketing, tracking sales, and obviously service delivery is strictly the affinity partners' responsibilities.

Before exploring any affinity agreements, IIUSA staff also undertook a membership survey to better understand members' business interests and needs. For what goods and services would association members appreciate a discount? With what types of vendors will IIUSA seek an affinity agreement? Suggestions include: translation services, shipping, and travel-related services. If you have any ideas for an IIUSA affinity agreement, please let us know!

What else?

IIUSA is strengthening its advocacy capacity by educating and including its entire membership in direct advocacy work. In February 2020, to bring data, guidance, and lobbying communication strategies to all of IIUSA, the association partnered with the Congressional Management Fund (CMF.) According to its website, CMF "works directly with citizen groups to educate them on how Congress works, giving constituents a stronger voice in policy outcomes. The results are: a Congress more accountable, transparent, and effective; and an informed

citizenry with greater trust in their democratic institutions."

CMF started as a not-for-profit dedicated to helping Congressional offices understand how to operate like the small businesses they are. Most new Members of Congress hire their closest campaign aides to lead their Washington, DC and District offices and many of those hires are experts in politics, but unaware of how to manage office budgets, human resources, lease agreements, or the myriad of types of communications incumbent on running a Congressional office.

As CMF engaged Congressional offices more and more and at particularly granular levels of management and communication, it found itself in the unique position of truly understanding Congressional office operations. Soon, other organizations and non-profits began asking CMF, "knowing what you know – what is the best way to communicate with Congressional offices and their staff?"

Since then, CMF began coordinating its information and understanding of Congressional office operations and collecting additional data to help non-profits effectively engage Capitol Hill. IIUSA's new partnership with CMF opens this information to our membership, allowing our professional lobbyists in turn to partner with a much broader swath of IIUSA members to impact our most pressing

federal issues.

For example, based on surveys of Congressional staff, CMF articulates the most effective ways for non-profits to engage on their key issues. The chart below is just a small part of the type of data CMF develops. This information, in conjunction with their custom training and support, empowers our members and strengthens our lobbyists' hand.

IIUSA can use this type of data to begin tailoring its advocacy work in ways it has not before. For example, as our lobbyists tackle specific negotiations and necessary in-person meetings on Capitol Hill, the association can train and support its members to deliver strategic messages through specific mediums to support our "boots on the ground," persuade Congressional staff with information and in ways that matter most to them and their bosses.

IIUSA's partnership with CMF also includes opportunities for specific training. In particular, we encourage members to participate in periodic webinars discussing topics like: Advocacy Strategies and Relationship Building with Congress, Perceptions and Use of Social Media on Capitol Hill, and How to Create a Local Event That Will Attract a Member of Congress.

IIUSA, as a platform for debate, resolution, and progress toward the EB-5 industry's common goals is broad, well supported, accessible, and stable. During the last year, the association made inroads to new policy opportunities and fortified the systems we knew were working well. However, progress and success stalls without new tools, new ideas, and innovation. So, when members justifiably ask, "what have you done for me lately?" there are clear answers and useful tools.

As the association supports its members and their platform during 2020, I hope you'll leverage these news tools. Let us know what affinity agreements will be most beneficial. When its live, log on and use the association's new website and actively engage IIUSA and its partnership with CMF to strengthen your advocacy strategies and the association's ultimate effectiveness. ▶

If your Member/Senator has not already arrived at a firm decision on an issue, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the Washington office have on his/her decision?

