

# G&S Insight

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## Is Your Credibility At Stake?

*Advocating Alliances Can Provide That Competitive Edge*

One of the most effective means of gaining positive media coverage and increasing your organization's credibility is also among the most often overlooked. Reaching out to third-party advocates – industry organizations, professional associations and the like – can be an essential component in achieving your communications objectives.

The overriding goal, of course, is to find ways in which all parties involved will derive real benefits. All it takes is the right approach, the right mindset and making the right connections.

This edition of *G&S Insight* takes a closer look at the value of aligning your organization with key “advocates” and working with these groups, or individuals, to help them not only understand your message, but also add credibility to it.



### Knowing Your Advocates

“Advocacy groups” and “advocates” are all-encompassing terms that refer to a wide range of organizations, groups or individuals that may influence perceptions – both positively and negatively – of products, services and even corporate policies.

Trade associations, consultants, industry analysts, government agencies, researchers and the media are just a few prime examples. Each of these groups or individuals can impact your marketing success through their support for, or opposition to, your product, service or point of view.

They can help shape perceptions, guide industry trends, impact opinions and affect purchasing decisions. As such, it is important to identify your industry's key advocates, establish relationships and nurture them over time.

### Working With the Influencers

Because it has so many highly visible professional associations, the healthcare industry provides a good

example of how third-party advocates can be a key ingredient in the communications mix.

Diverse in both their size and focus, healthcare associations may be comprised of physicians, physician assistants, nurses, physical therapists, researchers, investigators and other individuals, or they may include non-profit caregiving organizations, patient organizations or any number of influential groups. For most associations, their primary goals are to provide continuing education for members, to monitor and communicate important industry changes and, ultimately, to help improve the health and well-being of patients.

**“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”**  
- Margaret Mead

Media, as well as the general public, typically view professional healthcare associations as a leading source of information for their particular categories of concern, such as heart disease, lung cancer, arthritis and others. As such, they are often contacted by media to communicate their industry's position on key topics.

For example, a reporter doing a story on a class of medications that has been in the news for potential problems associated with cardiovascular disease may contact the American Heart Association or a similar group to get its perspective. It is critical, therefore, for any pharmaceutical companies with products falling within this class of drugs to have communicated key messages to the professional associations that serve as industry thought leaders.



Professional associations are adept at gathering and sharing a steady flow of knowledge among their members and with external constituents, whether through traditional meetings, seminars and print media, or via e-zines, webinars, virtual learning and blogs. In this age of instant access, association web sites are often a first point of contact whether seeking general or in-depth information.

With their inherently high levels of visibility, credibility and sophistication, associations in all industries carry great weight as allies to reach the media – and their membership ranks – with messages of interest to your company.

What issues are important to your business today? Do the professional associations in your industry know your company's position? Better yet, are they advocates for you?

## Advocates of Change

Individual influencers and the smaller "support group" organizations represent the other end of the advocacy spectrum. They are often focused on education and affecting behavioral change.

Building strong relationships with the right industry influencers carries a significance that reaches far beyond the immediate, tangible benefits that first come to mind. The relationships can become critical when a problem or crisis emerges by adding credible, fact-based support for your position.

In agribusiness, for example, communications training programs aimed at professional farm managers have helped convey agriculture's positive stories to non-ag audiences. This is particularly important at a time when urban sprawl continues to test the limits of the American Dream – home ownership – and the conservation of America's farmland.

Likewise, by developing mutually beneficial relationships with the U.S.

Green Building Council, Rocky Mountain Institute and other influential groups within the residential and commercial building products sector, one heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) manufacturer established clear industry leadership for its environmental initiatives and successfully gained a significant competitive edge.

When was the last time your industry underwent a technology change, adopted new standards or implemented regulations that impacted your business? Oftentimes, such change is championed by a relatively small, yet mighty group with focus, passion and a purpose.

Their commitment to the cause, particularly if controversial, spawns the type of media attention that can lead to public debate and, ultimately, to the desired change. Is your company part of the debate? Are you in tune with the advocates of your industry?

## The Media


For both consumer and business-to-business marketers, the media itself is a key influencer, too. In good times – and perhaps more importantly in bad – there often are no better advocates to have than the editors, reporters and broadcasters covering your business.

Like any industry, the media has its share of movers and shakers, even if only a handful, who can bolster a company's image as quickly as it can tarnish one. Building a rapport and cultivating these relationships is critical to establishing and maintaining credibility.

## Making it Work

From large, multinational or international corporations to local and regional businesses, successfully working with the advocates in your industry can have a significant, strategic impact on your business. That holds true for both b-to-c or

b-to-b marketers regardless of industry or market focus.

Look closely at your industry and you'll likely find several advocates that can serve as portals to reaching your communication objectives. Over time, these advocates can become your best allies. 

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