

# Doing the Right Thing Offers More Than a Good Feeling

By Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

In the old days they were called “community service projects,” now they are better known as “Social Responsibility Programs”. Whatever name is attached to them, these programs provide a lot of opportunities for associations, Chambers, and other membership organizations beyond the “right thing to do” quality.

There are a number of tangible and intangible benefits to undertaking an organized Social Responsibility effort. These include:

## **-organizational branding**

It's o.k. – in fact, it's actually good – for an organization to stand for something in addition to what's written in its bylaws and mission statement. Sometimes political issues can be too controversial for organizations to undertake but social responsibility programs often can bring together members with disparate views.

## **-developing new partnerships**

Social responsibility programs can produce all kinds of partnerships among organizations that might not otherwise seem to have much in common. This includes private and governmental sector partners as well as other membership organizations.

## **-member engagement opportunities**

Getting some of those “borderline” members to participate in traditional programs and services is always challenging. An active social responsibility program provides a very unique engagement opportunity, especially for members seeking ways to be more involved.

## **-membership retention**

Remember that when members have that renewal notice in front of them, their decision to renew is based on an overall membership “experience.” If part of that experience is a feeling that their organization is making a difference in some meaningful way, the chances of them signing up for another year increase.

## **-new member recruitment**

Organizations have been complaining for years about the difficulty of attracting younger people to membership, and studies done by ASAE and other organizations show that today's young people put a high value on “making a difference” and doing socially responsible things. Why not give these young people a chance to fulfill some of their social responsibility wishes while at the same time providing a wider variety of member benefits to all potential members?

## **-potential fundraising**

In recent years, it has been getting more and more difficult to convince organizational sponsors to continue funding events, social activities, golf tournaments, and even educational efforts. Economic conditions have everyone cutting back, and paying closer attention to all expenditures (including dues, contributions, etc.). Social responsibility programs give organizations opportunities to seek support outside of their normal funding sources, and give previous supporters another option on ways to participate

### **-direct member benefit**

Some programs not only provide an outlet for organizational impact, they also can (as seen in the following example) serve as an actual member benefit. By supporting or participating in social responsibility programs, member can accrue such specific benefits as tax credits; continuing education credits; certification points; lower insurance rates; community service credits; etc.

### **-mission accomplishment**

All organizations have some element in their Charter about creating a better profession, industry, and/or community. This “greater good” aspect is what makes these organizations so valuable to their members and to society in general. Social responsibility programs can become a personification of what this greater good can look like.

## **How One Association Made Social Responsibility a Winner for Everyone**

Each New Year brings the normal list of resolutions, good wishes and plans of action. It also brings a plethora of new laws and regulations at the national, state, and local levels. One of these laws (being implemented by a growing number of jurisdictions) also holds some far-reaching opportunities for associations, Chambers, and other membership organizations. It has several names, but it is most commonly referred to as the **Distracted Driver** law.

Distracted driving (texting or using cell phones while driving) has become a true epidemic in America. Most of us have seen the public service announcements and are familiar with the problem, but once you’ve seen the statistics and really understand the science of this issue it changes your perspective on it. We invited David Teater, the staffer who heads the Distracted Driving Program for the National Safety Council, to explain the impact distracted driving has had to the attendees at a meeting of the Chain Link Fence Manufacturers Institute (CLFMI), the organization for which I serve as Executive Vice President.

His presentation blew our members away. It not only got them thinking about it in personal and business terms (after Dave’s program, several of our members instituted in-company programs and policies) it also got them thinking about ways that our organization could make a difference. It got *me* thinking about how all of us can get involved in these types of socially-responsible programs and, at the same time, have some real impact on our members businesses.

Here are some of the activities we initiated and the result of these efforts.

-Our Board adopted a resolution encouraging member firms to implement Distracted Driver policies in their firms. This just made good business sense – CLFMI members have thousands of employees on the road in company vehicles every day, many driving large vehicles hauling heavy loads of materials. In addition, there are sales people, company executives, and other employees traveling on company business regularly.

-Working with NSC, we provided members with sample policies.

-We established a Distracted Driver policy for association staffers.

-Company representatives told us that employees had committed to eliminating (or at least reducing) cell phone use and texting while driving their personal vehicles.

-We got another industry-related association to partner with us in promoting the adoption of Distracted Driver policies throughout the industry.

-Member firms who instituted Distracted Driver policies will be able to use their new policies to help negotiate lower rates with auto, workers compensation, and other insurance carriers.

-Distracted driver policies are now being added to New Employee Orientation programs in member companies.

-Our association has been recognized throughout the industry for its commitment to socially responsible programs (we also sponsor a Hire a Hero program encouraging members to employ wounded veterans).

As everyone has to deal with reduced resources and ever-increasing member expectations, it might seem as though there is no time right now for your organization to take on any new programs. However, if you consider all the benefits of including social responsibility as part of your organization's "brand" you might find that the effort will be well-rewarded in the form of higher retention, greater member involvement, and an enhanced image for your organization.

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