

I had the privilege of serving for almost 30 years as a trustee/director of museums in my home state of Minnesota. Because of that important experience, and my years on the job here at AAM, I have come to believe that it is critically important for museum trustees to be aware of, and engaged in, the issues that are of paramount importance to the broader museum field.

– Ford W. Bell, DVM, President, American Association of Museums

Chapter 4

Your Secret Weapon: Your Board

We've already discussed the many ways in which advocacy directed at elected officials is very much like the work you do to cultivate donors and engage the public.

It's all about pairing the most effective spokesperson with the most effective message.

Board Members are in the perfect position to help carry your message to elected officials. Here's why:

1. They know people. They have established networks and connections, and may already have an existing relationship with your elected officials. You probably already call upon board members to help with fundraising. Advocacy in this context is about taking similar messages to another audience: elected officials.
2. They have a different kind of authority. Museum professionals are perfectly capable of being effective advocates, but board members have

something even more powerful. Because they often come from a different industry and may be employed elsewhere, they are seen as more independent, and can act as “third-party validators.”

3. They bring a different perspective. Chances are your board is made up of people with divergent backgrounds, varying philosophies, and different approaches (which may make for some really interesting meetings!). You may have educators, business leaders, veterans, philanthropists, community leaders and parents on your board. All of these perspectives may help make the case for your museum in a new, more influential way. This approach may be more appealing to an elected official.
4. They bring diversity. It’s likely that your board already reflects the diversity of the communities you serve. This is already important in your public outreach efforts. It can also be valuable for advocating to elected officials, especially when your museum is serving more isolated or underserved communities.
5. They bring geographic diversity. Depending on where you live, you may have board members living in several different states, or several different counties. Therefore they have the ability to reach out to many more elected officials—as constituents—than you could by yourself.
6. They are considered experts. It is assumed that everyone associated with your museum is fairly well versed in all that the museum does. But there is an expectation that board members will also have access to different kinds of information: structural, financial, and organizational. This doesn’t mean that they must memorize your tax return. Rather, they can simply carry the message with extra authority. They may have institutional knowledge about a particular topic, or simply have a breadth of experience from years of work in museums or in another field. Just as your museum staff holds its board members in high esteem, so will your community.

7. They put their money where their mouths are. There is an assumption that your trustees have weighed the many competing priorities in their lives and decided to invest in your museum. By contributing their time, energy, and money to your museum's cause, they are making a subtle yet powerful statement that your museum deserves public support.
8. They (may) have more time. Some of your board members may be retired. Some may have a lot of flexibility in their schedules. And some may view their board responsibilities as a welcome distraction from their other work.
9. They may be aligned politically. The good news for museums is that there is no niche constituency: the fact is, everyone loves museums! However, there may be some elected officials who are more or less inclined to support your museum based on political considerations. If the elected official is a fiscal conservative, for example, he or she may not support your public funding. Finding the right messenger—perhaps a board member who has a financial or corporate background—can help overcome these concerns. In this case, this board member can discuss the museum as a wise economic investment for the community.

I think we've made our point.

But now what? How do we go about getting board members to advocate for museums?

The first thing is to realize that you already rely on board members to serve as “ambassadors” for your museum: to donors, to community groups, to the media. Extending this ambassador role to advocacy is not really such a stretch.

One strategy is to involve your board in an advocacy exercise. In chapter 3, we recommended having your board conduct an “Advocacy Inventory” to enhance and centralize your arsenal of information that you use to advocate.

An Advocacy Inventory will help your board members identify natural connections between them and your elected officials.

Some of your board members may already have connections to local elected officials, and may be willing to expand these connections and reach out to elected officials on the state or federal level.

Another strategy is to keep your board up to date on what's happening on the advocacy front. You know what they say: "Out of sight, out of mind." So keep them aware of what's going on.

One way to do this is to always include an Advocacy Update on your board meeting agenda. A board member can even be assigned to report on this topic. Does your board have an Advocacy Committee? Maybe it should.

If you yourself are a board member reading this and want to get more involved (first of all, thank you!), think about the small steps you can take right away. Will you volunteer to provide an advocacy report at board meetings? Will you encourage your board to complete an Advocacy Inventory during an upcoming board meeting? Will you attend Museums Advocacy Day?

To further engage your board, we recommend making sure they all receive AAM's Advocacy Alerts (you can sign up to receive them right away by visiting www.speakupformuseums.org). That way, during board meetings, you can discuss the latest Advocacy Alerts and be sure your museum is getting involved at all the right times.

AAM works hard to provide clear and concise messages to advocates and to provide a specific "ask" in our Advocacy Alerts. We know that this makes advocacy so much easier! There's nothing worse than contacting elected officials with an unclear message, only to have them say (or think), "Now what do these people want me to do?"

AAM's advocacy website, www.speakupformuseums.org, also makes advocacy very easy, with contact information for legislators and with template letters that can be personalized and sent electronically.

One last strategy is to involve the board in all of your advocacy activities. This is particularly helpful for board members who may be intimidated by advocacy, or for the smaller museum with a lower profile. Invite board members to join you if you attend a public hearing. If you invite elected officials to visit your museum, invite a few board members to be present. As they get more involved in advocacy activities, they will feel more comfortable and you will have new advocacy surrogates that you can turn to.

To further build their confidence in advocacy, be sure that all board members are equipped with information, statistics, and success stories about your museum, so that they are always ready to advocate for your museum.

Building relationships is key to everything your museum does. The same principle holds true for elected officials. The more you learn about them, the better position you are in to be an effective advocate. You can follow elected officials on Twitter, or become a fan on Facebook. And if they leave office, don't count them out. Maintain these relationships, too, since you never know when someone will re-emerge on the political scene in a new capacity.

At some point, you may even invite an elected official (or a former one) to serve on your board. If you pursue this route, consider what kinds of activities or board committees that you would want them to become involved in. One way they can be extremely helpful is in creating a strategy for contacting other elected officials.

However you choose to involve your board members in advocacy, the basic case for museums must always be crystal clear: museums are *essential*.

- They are economic engines.
- They are a critical part of the educational infrastructure.
- They create jobs.
- They are stewards of our national heritage.
- They foster creativity and innovation.
- They spur tourism.
- They help to revitalize communities.
- They celebrate cultural diversity.
- They attract businesses to the community.
- They serve as community anchors.
- They are a source of civic and community pride.

These facts must be made clear to every elected official at every level of government.

And here's a final thought for you: advocacy is really a fundamental responsibility of all board members. AAM believes so strongly in this concept that it plans to add this tenet to its official "job description" of a board member. Perhaps your board should, too!