

How Associations Can Leverage Volunteers as Strategic Ambassadors

ASAE | Jason Briefel | September 21, 2026



Project Management Institute (PMI) shares practical lessons for associations seeking to expand volunteer leadership and deepen member engagement in new ways.

Volunteers are the backbone of any association, but as member expectations evolve to include opportunities to lead, contribute, and make an impact, leaders need to take a closer look at how they engage the people most connected to their organization's mission.

One of the greatest opportunities many associations have is to empower their volunteers not only to support their shared mission, but also to represent the profession. At PMI, that idea recently inspired a new approach to volunteer engagement: Chapter leaders were invited to play an active role in national advocacy by bringing their local expertise and firsthand experience into conversations with policymakers.

The result was the first PMI Chapter President's Day on Capitol Hill initiative, where 20 volunteer chapter leaders from across the United States took part in more than 45 meetings with congressional offices in Washington, DC. During these meetings, chapter leaders shared the "so what" and how their chapters make a unique impact locally. Volunteer leaders shared how project professionals contribute to their communities, strengthen local workforces, and help organizations navigate complex challenges.

While this initiative focused on government outreach, education, and advocacy, the broader lessons apply to any association aiming to create stronger volunteer leadership opportunities. When volunteers feel included in the journey and are prepared, trusted, and given meaningful chances to lead, they can become strategic ambassadors who extend an association's relevance beyond traditional member engagement.

View Volunteers as Strategic Ambassadors

PMI opened the Chapter President's Day on Capitol Hill initiative to volunteers, soliciting chapter presidents on a first-come, first-served basis to the first 20 respondents. Out of a population of nearly 150, almost half expressed interest in participating in association outreach activities—an early recognition of the desire to engage in this way. The 20 selected presidents hailed from 18 different states and reflected the diversity of the country, including a mix of urban/rural areas. These volunteer chapter presidents authentically represented their local regions, the industries they serve, and the members they support. Because of their close connection to local professionals, employers, and institutions, they were best positioned to speak with policymakers about the challenges facing their communities, the opportunities, what their chapter is doing to make a difference locally, and the impact and potential of the project management profession.

This approach presented an important lesson: Volunteers are so much more than just participants in an association's work. They can be trusted, strategic ambassadors who help advance the shared mission in ways that reach beyond traditional volunteer roles.

Invest in Volunteer Preparation

Before the Capitol Hill meetings, PMI worked closely with participating chapter leaders through five hour-long recorded preparation sessions designed to build familiarity, camaraderie, and confidence. The PMI Government Affairs team developed one-page briefing materials, messaging guidance, and resources to help volunteers communicate effectively with policymakers. Chapter leaders reported that this preparation work, especially the live prep-practice sessions, was invaluable for making them feel ready for the big day on Capitol Hill.

Engagement with volunteers should not end with the invitation to participate. By investing in preparation and foundational resources and infrastructure, associations can help volunteers represent the organization confidently and consistently while still adapting the message to their audience and local conditions.

Create Space for Authentic Stories

While PMI crafted a policy agenda and related discussion points to aid participants, rather than asking chapter leaders to deliver a scripted message, PMI encouraged them to speak from their own life experiences. Chapter presidents spoke about how their chapters cultivate project management skills in their communities, the industries represented within their membership, and why project management capabilities are increasingly important to workforce development.

These local stories bring broader issues to life. They show how an association's mission translates into real impact for individuals, organizations, and communities, giving external audiences a clearer sense of why that mission matters. The lesson here is that consistency is key, but authenticity is what makes these conversations meaningful.

Design Volunteer Experiences That Create Lasting Engagement

The top priority of the PMI initiative was to support renewed focus on government advocacy efforts, but we were also striving to create a leadership opportunity for our volunteer leaders that could help scale the impact of PMI's outreach efforts. As representatives of their profession, chapter leaders gained experience, connected with their own elected officials in Washington, DC, strengthened connections across the PMI community, and helped shape how PMI engages with external stakeholders.

Volunteer engagement is most powerful when participants can see how their contributions connect to a larger purpose. Experiences that offer visibility, ownership, and impact are more likely to deepen commitment and inspire continued involvement with an association.

It can be challenging to find ways to strengthen member value and build deeper relationships with the volunteer community. Yet by recognizing volunteers' potential as leaders, creating meaningful ways for them to contribute, and investing in their learning and preparation, associations can develop strategic ambassadors who carry the shared mission into new conversations, communities, and opportunities for impact.