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Mary Kate Cunningham:

Welcome to the Stronger by Association Podcast. This podcast will share stories about how associations are solving problems in the United States and around the world. This is brought to you by American Society of Association Executives, ASAE, a membership organization of more than 46,000 association professionals, industry partners in the United States in 50 countries. Our members make the world safer, better and smarter.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Welcome to the Stronger by Association Podcast. It's our first episode of the year. We made it to 2021 and it's been a wild year for public policy. We're excited to talk about advocacy and American Associations Day. And for that, I have a tremendous cohost from the Public Policy Team, Nate Fisher. Welcome, Nate.

Nate Fisher:

Thank you, Mary Kate. I'm glad and happy to be here, and I'm excited. I think this conversation is going to be a great one. With a new year, a new administration. And almost a year into the pandemic, we have some great and amazing guests that we're very happy and excited to hear what they have to say about 2021 and excited to talk about American Associations Day.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Absolutely. Advocacy has certainly had to change in the covid environment, so it will be great to talk to three different leaders about how they've pivoted their association work and to talk about the critical importance of advocacy. Nate, can you share more with us about American Associations Day?

Nate Fisher:

Of course. I know last year we had many members who were a little disappointed that we had to cancel the week before... or the week after the lockdowns started, but we've very excited to have American Associations again this year. It's going to look very different. It's going to be virtual, but we'll still have all the basics and some amazing programming. Everyone should mark their calendars already, March 25th and 26th. You can get CAE credits and we have an amazing lineup of guests and different sessions that I think will be very, very beneficial for everyone coming into the new year.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Nate, can you share how we're going to do the Hill Visits a little differently this year?

Nate Fisher:

Yeah. Absolutely. As you know, Capital Hill is still closed and we're still getting through the pandemic, so our Hill meetings will be a little different. Unfortunately, we can't have everyone fly in and go to their members of Congress, but we are excited because we think this is going to be an opportunity for us to even meet with more Hill staff and offices.

Nate Fisher:

So, this year, we're going to have people sign up and they're going to work with us and we'll make sure that they have a Zoom call or a phone call for their senators or members of Congress. Our goal is to reach out to as many staff and offices as we can. I know it's a new Congress and a new administration, so there's a lot of new people on the Hill and new faces that really need to know the importance of associations.

Nate Fisher:

So, we're really excited to be able to meet with all of those offices and make sure that all of our members and everyone who wants to join American Associations Day can still have a little piece of the Hill with them.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Absolutely, and we are glad to have you as our cohost today, Nate.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

I am pleased to welcome Scott Wiley, FASAE, CE, present CO of the Ohio Society of CPAs and our Public Policy Committee Chair. Welcome, Scott.

Scott Wiley:

Thanks Mary Kate. It's great to be with you again.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

So, we're really excited to talk about American Associations Day and the critical role of public policy. Can you share with us your thoughts on... We've got a new year, a new House and Senate and administration. What are priorities for associations in public policy?

Scott Wiley:

Well, I think it's important to say our agenda is deep and wide as it's ever been. And that really is reflective of the role of associations in society today. Certainly a big way to end 2020 is a huge win, in large part thanks to the great work of the ASE public policy team and so many advocates was the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which extended and made 501-C6 organizations eligible to participate in the Paycheck Protection Program, or more commonly known as PPP.

Scott Wiley:

So, we know that many associations are now included and also looking at this. So, that's a big legislative victory, for sure. But it's also a big victory for the impact that associations make. We spent the better part of 2020 advocating for associations to be included in this act, to be eligible for PPP because the important work they do, the impact they were feeling as a result of the pandemic.

Scott Wiley:

So, certainly we want to encourage associations to take a hard look at this and make sure if it's something they need and they're eligible for they avail themselves of it because we want to be in a position to have demonstrated to legislators and other key influencers, not only the power of [inaudible]

00:05:37] and why associations matter. But in a time when we needed that relief and they gave it to us, we actually availed ourselves of it. Because on the after action report, we want to make sure we showed up and we're still there to help advance society. I think that's one and that's critically important.

Scott Wiley:

Yeah, some other big issues that we're going to continue to work on is as it relates to how we power through and make 2021 our year. We had a couple big things on the radar as you mentioned, Mary Kate. We've got a number of new lawmakers in the Congress. We've got a brand new administration.

Scott Wiley:

So, our role to educate them about the role of associations, the impact, the critical issues, that's got to remain front and center. So, clearly we've got to be able to walk and chew gum. Or quite frankly, run and blow bubbles at the same time.

Scott Wiley:

Some big bills that are on the horizon that we've been working on, the Pandemic Risk Insurance Act, or PRIA, which would establish a system of shared public and private compensation for business interruption losses, as well as even cancellations that result from future pandemics should they arise, or public health emergencies.

Scott Wiley:

This is one of those ones where hey, let's learn from the experience we've just been in and plan for what could come next. And then, your team has been out front on this next one for us. This idea that we've got to further expand access to association certification, like the Skills Renewal Act, which we know would help Americans who've been laid off, who've been furloughed as a result of Covid-19, as they're pursuing post-secondary skills training as well as credentials. And that would help re-establish their own welfare and well being.

Scott Wiley:

So, those are some the things that are on the radar. I think equally as important, right, we're talking about the new year. We need to not lose sight of some of the things that we have learned in the last year. And you and I have talked a lot about this, Mary Kate.

Scott Wiley:

2020 clearly was a year where advocacy moved fast into the digital space. And in every conversation I'm having, I think it's only been cemented that digital is going to be the primary driver for advocacy as we go into the next year.

Scott Wiley:

And so, associations need to be thinking about a few things. How are they prioritizing building a robust social media presence on multiple platforms. What's the best way to prepare for communications crisis is to have a proactive and sustained digital communication strategy and plan.

Scott Wiley:

And you've got to be thinking about how you communicate with intent. Really this is a great opportunity for us to transform our audience really into well-informed virtual champions for our cause. And that's not going to just happen. We're going to have to invest in that. We're going to have to train people.

Scott Wiley:

And we should also be remembering. This is how Congress and their aides are also transforming. So, we kind of do it with care and intentionality. It's not just a shotgun approach.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Yeah, when you talk about associations finally getting access to the PPP, we know it's not... it was an imperfect victory. There are still associations who are locked out. But, I just got off a call with people who run the State Societies for Associations, and it was so great hearing so many people who were approved for loans and are starting to receive the money. And it's really going to keep associations afloat.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

So, I'm very excited about that. And I think it also goes back to the incredible work that association advocates did this year to go from being cut out of the program in the spring to having a huge grassroots campaign. I just remember Nate and I have been on meetings with the Blue Dogs and the Problem Solvers Caucus. All the moderate groups are really pushing to get work done. And I remember talking about the case for PPP expansion to C6s, and just seeing all the members of Congress nodding, like they'd been hearing from people in their district. And that's what we have to keep up, that kind of momentum because we know we're going to have fights in the future. But it was really heartening to see even just talking... I talked to a tax staffer from Speaker Pelosi's office and she said, "We were so happy to do this because our members of the Caucus, our members in the House were hearing so much from associations."

Scott Wiley:

It's been said time and time again, and we have to remind ourselves. It's not just that associations make an impact on society. They do. But associations are the employers of a large segment, direct and indirectly, of the American workforce. So having access to this critical type of federal relief in the PPP is essential, not only to keep associations being able to make the impact, to advocate for standards, to advocate for safety, to advocate for people in industry. But it's also important to keep associations employing people to do that work.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Absolutely. And you talk about the Skills Renewal Act and certification legislation. I think that's so critical because it helps... it obviously would provide incredible benefit to society, but also helps remind congressional staff and leaders what certification is, how we train the workforce, and the role of associations positively in society.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

So, I'm very heartened that we're making moves forward on legislation to support certification, especially for people who have been displaced by Covid. It's exactly what our community should be doing right now.

Scott Wiley:

Right on, Mary Kate. And we all as association professionals and practitioners and association management need to remember, and the ASA Research Foundation has the data for us to tell this story. Associations are the largest providers of post-secondary training workforce development in the country. We are making a difference in allowing our nation to move forward and upskill its population, to repurpose our workforce to get back to work and to lead our country forward.

Scott Wiley:

So, we've got to make sure we're connecting those dots. We can't just let it be a oh, we do so many things. We forgot to mention that. That is not a detail that we can forget to mention over and over and over again.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Absolutely. And when I think about advocacy, I think about the great D.C. phrase, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu. And that's definitely, we know, important for our community. We're going to be at the table and to talk about that. Can you share why you think it's important for people to attend American Associations Day?

Scott Wiley:

Absolutely. I've been to more American Association Days than I can count. And that's important because every year, being able to not only just go to the Hill, or engage with our representatives. So, it doesn't have to be in person. It can happen in a virtual or back home setting. To tell our story, it's critically important. But the coming together with our peers to hear of the impact, outside of the profession I represent or the industries I'm engaged with, and the disciplines that I know about, to just hear the collective input. It's powerful. Right? And it informs our own perspective about the nature of the work we do.

Scott Wiley:

And quite frankly, it makes me proud to be a part of this community and be proud to be doing the work of associations. But American Associations Day is critically important because it is that day. It is that period of time each year where we collectively are setting aside for a moment the work of our associations to talk about the impact and work of associations, about how we protect people, about how we get people skills, about how we employ people, about how our economic impact is helping local and state, and certainly the broader economy find its way forward and find its way back.

Scott Wiley:

So, being a part of that experience is incredibly important, incredibly powerful. But also demonstrates to us and to those we're speaking with just how valuable and just how critical associations are. They are the backbone of the American economy and helping people develop the skills they need, have access to the training they want, and more importantly, to the future we're creating.

Nate Fisher:

Scott and Mary Kate, thank you so much for bringing up American Associations Day and the Skills Renewal Act, too. I know last year, we had a lot of our members excited to come to Washington to advocate for the Skills Renewal Act. And of course, we had to cancel that due to the Covid pandemic.

What would you... I know we're very excited to have American Associations Day this year. It's going to be... look a little different. It's going to be virtual. How would you, Scott, give advice to any associations that want to continue to do their fly-ins, but during this difficult time, it might look different?

Scott Wiley:

Well, I think Nate, you're bringing up a great point. I think let's just rip the bandaid off and say in light of what we have encountered over the last almost year, certainly 10 plus months, the pandemic has forever changed the nature of the environment. And certainly, as we sit here at the end of January in this taping, we know the activities of the last month, too, are going to have an impact.

Scott Wiley:

So, the likelihood that we see in the near future a return to in-person legislative or lobbying days on the Hill, it is not great. But that does not mean that the voices of associations, and certainly the professions, disciplines and industries they represent, need to be diminished as a result of it. If anything, it gives us a great opportunity to figure out how we can amplify our impact.

Scott Wiley:

I was having a conversation with a colleague who leads a state-level association in Maryland the other day. And they just had 600 members, nearly two times... the most they've ever had. And they are date of advocacy at the state house.

Scott Wiley:

So, I think associations are finding their way forward and finding new ways to create even greater levels of engagement. So, I think it's time to sit down. Hey, what have we done? What's been a win out of that and what does this environment give us as an opportunity to blow up and make it even better?

Scott Wiley:

So, I already see associations innovating that regard. I think the worst thing an association could do is say, "because of the pandemic, because of the activities of last 30 days at the Capitol, we're going to can, and we're just going to not do anything this year." That is probably the worst idea out there. Now is the time, to Mary Kate's point, to lean in, to accelerate, to stay engaged, to tell the story, to make the case, to prove the point, to demonstrate the value that associations are making and how they're transforming lives, transforming society. And quite frankly, making our country better.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Scott, thank you so much for joining us and for your advocacy over the years. You've been a huge champion for association advocacy. We look forward to having you speak at the fly-in again this year.

Scott Wiley:

Can't wait. I'm looking forward to it. Thanks for having me on today.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

I'm pleased to welcome Franklin Davis, senior director federal affairs for the American Beverage Association. Welcome Franklin.

Franklin Davis:

Thank you, Mary Kate. And thank you for having me in ASA.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

So, Franklin, you are the consonant lobbyist. So, can you tell us how 2020 has been for you and ABA, and how it compares to 2021?

Franklin Davis:

I would say it is been difficult and challenging. But at the same time, it's been fun. We've had to figure out how to be advocates in a mostly virtual environment. And that's led to being able to get greater access I think, in some cases, to members and staff. Gone are the days when you just hang out in the cafeteria, trying to grab people as they made their way by, or dropping in on an office. Things are more scheduled. And I don't know for people like you who love to sort of crossing the Ts and dotting the Is, that more formality has been great for some lobbyists.

Franklin Davis:

I can say in my industry, it's been helpful getting, particularly with senior staff on the phone and giving them a dedicated time to reach out to have a conversation. And I found that the lobbying's been more focused because of that. You don't really have that half an hour where you talk about kids and sports teams. These guys have got calls and Zooms with lobbyists, with their bosses, with their colleagues on the Hill.

Franklin Davis:

So, it's made meetings definitely a lot more tighter. So, I guess for adversity, we've been able to hone the craft of lobbying a little bit more. And I hope when things, "go back to a new normal," and we can go back to Capitol and we can have coffees at Dunkin, we'll still be able to keep some of the virtual environment where you can do calls and do advocacy visits in basketball shorts.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Absolutely. You really have to feel for Hill staff right now. I didn't think they could get busier. Now they are just stretched so thin. And some of them are working from group houses on the Hill with a bunch of kids and not a lot of wifi. And it's impressive they've been able to keep up during this time.

Franklin Davis:

Well, I will say one of the things that I try to do is I try not to bother them on Fridays. And if it's something that could be done with a phone call, I won't ask them to boot up the Zoom. Because to your point, in group houses, they've got dogs, they've got kids. They've got all these other things happening. They're homeschooling. There's elder care issues. Things that we didn't normally think about before Covid. So, I try to be respectful, and I look at Fridays as a sacred time, so if I can get it done in a phone call in six minutes, I'll do that.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Okay, that's a great tip. I'm going to steal that, certainly. What are your priorities that you've got on the landscape this year?

Franklin Davis:

One of the biggest things I'm working on right now, and I'd say I'm dedicating 85, 90% of my time to right now, is policy around environment and sustainability. As the American Beverage Association, we produce a lot of containers. We want to make sure we're doing our good parts as stewards of the environment, and making sure we're getting those containers back. So we've launched, I think a pretty revolutionary program called Every Bottle Back. We're working with partners in the NGO space. We're working with local communities as they manage their recycling programs to make sure that those bottles, particularly our member company bottles, don't end up in waterways, on roadsides. We want to remake that bottle into a new bottle.

Franklin Davis:

So, making sure that Congress and the new administration know that when you talk about infrastructure, take the time to talk about recycling infrastructure, too. It's not as sexy as broadband or roads or transit or some of the more traditional types of infrastructure, but it's something that we know we need to upgrade. When you think about using recycled materials, you're doing something to help impact the climate crisis. I think if you're using less PET resin, less energy to produce new things, you're in a good position to do your part, to look at your carbon footprint and improve it.

Nate Fisher:

Yeah, so I know you talked a little about this earlier. Not only are we with relation to Covid, but this new year we also have a new administration. So, what would you say are some of the key things association lobbyists should know or remember to do during a change in administration?

Franklin Davis:

The biggest thing I've done is I've let the new administration get settled in these first seven, eight days. As I talk to friends who've gone, and particularly at the White House, they're like we want to hear about this awesome thing you're doing, or we just want to chat. But at the same time, I'm still trying to make sure my badge works. So that's the immediate sort of challenge right now.

Franklin Davis:

And I think as we let them get settled in over the next several weeks, then I think you can come in before you even have [00:23:11] and get to know them. If you've got something related to Covid, if you've got something related to economic recovery, if you've got something related to climate change or racial equity, this is the time to tell people how your industry is addressing those things.

Franklin Davis:

I talked a little bit about our infrastructure program and our Every Bottle Back initiative. We think it fits very neatly in that climate change bucket. So, once they get settled, once we have an opportunity to formally introduce ourselves, and we want to make sure we're talking about how our new initiative ties directly into one of their main components as they figure out how President Biden can make his mark on this new term he has.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

I think the most I've seen associations at the table at the beginning of an administration in a while. We're really excited to see associations at the table. How do you see that just increasing going forward?



Franklin Davis:

When I look at the association landscape, associations have some very powerful stories to tell. For the most part, we are in every congressional district. We are in every community. And our members are voters. They're the folks that you see in the grocery store. They are the folks that you go to church with. And they're also in the same places politicians are when they're at home.

Franklin Davis:

So, it just makes sense that we use our collective voices as an association industry collectively or as individual associations or societies to make sure we're advocating for the best policy positions.

Franklin Davis:

And picking up this thought about how associations are leading the change. I think if you look at the Covid landscape... and I feel like everything we do has been shaped by Covid. I feel like associations have been called to lead like never before. I look at the work you've done, Mary Kate, in making sure that funding was available for associations. In terms of all the things happening in the world, no one would think that would rise to the level of being seen by politicians. But you guys at ASAE did a great job to make sure that associations and their employees have access to some of the Covid funds to make sure they can keep their doors open and continue to be bright spots in their communities.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Absolutely. And that was really thanks to the work of associations around the country. And our message was associations need to survive this so that we can help lead industries and professions. Absolutely.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

So, we know you've attended American Associations Day before. Can you talk a little bit about the value you think of associations advocating for the community as a whole?

Franklin Davis:

What I love about ASA Association Day is fly-ins in general. It's a great opportunity to get folks who aren't normally roaming the halls of Congress, who aren't normally in contact with electives and their staffs everyday engaged. I mean, Franklin Davis, ABA lobbyist, can go in and say the same thing over and over. But get someone from the local district or their town, and the member, the staff member, it's a completely different level of engagement with them. And when you can replicate that hundreds of times like you do during Association Days on the Hill, I think that is vital because they see the real world impact. Again, I can sell it. I can talk about it. But when they say, hey, I'm the president of this professional society, or when I run this bottling operation in your hometown, this is how policy impacts me day-to-day. And that helps get that message home.

Nate Fisher:

Franklin, can you talk about what ABA does for their fly-in?

Franklin Davis:

Yeah, so the ABA fly-in, in a traditional time I think we'd do it like a lot of folks around town. Bring in a few hundred people. We'd have a dinner. There may be a reception on the Hill. Organize folks based

around issues. Or congressional delegations, you'd go in and you'd lobby the issues of the day. In our industry, it might be something on the environment or something on transportation.

Franklin Davis:

But as we are currently planning for our fly-in in 2021, we're thinking through how do you do that in a virtual environment? How do you make sure you're still getting that same level of engagement? In some ways, I've said, it's easier to do virtual meetings, telephone calls. But you also miss that in-person touch, where folks aren't... In the office, they are thinking about nothing but the fly-in, and not what's happening at home when you bring them physically to the Capitol.

Franklin Davis:

So there's some pros and cons to that. But, as we continue thinking about our virtual fly-in, we're thinking we get an opportunity to hit a lot more offices. We're not concentrated in a one-day block or two-day block. If we need to spread some things out over the month to make sure we can connect that local contact with a member or that member's senior staff, we're going to do that. We're definitely in those plans.

Franklin Davis:

Can't wait to go back to in-person fly-ins, but I think when we look at how the current environment, Covid and the ability to keep people's attention is all thrown into the stew, we're going to make a pretty solid virtual fly-in work there.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Well, thank you so much, Franklin, for joining us. Do you have any last words for people who are on the fence about whether or not they should participate in American Associations Day?

Franklin Davis:

My final words on that would be do it. It is one of the best experiences you can have. Even if you aren't a seasoned lobbyist like Mary Kate or some of the other folks at ASAE, this is an opportunity for your policy makers, your elected leaders to hear from you. You have a powerful story to tell and you've got to tell it here in Washington D.C.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

It's like we paid you to say that, Franklin.

Franklin Davis:

Thank you.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Thanks for joining us.

Franklin Davis:

The one thing I want to do, Mary Kate, on the back end here is I want to thank you again. I know we had that segment at the beginning. So, I want to thank you, Mary Kate and ASAE for having me here today.

Nate Fisher:

And now we're pleased to welcome Kevin Serafino, vice president of federal government relations and public policy and internal counsel at the household and commercial products association. Welcome Kevin.

Kevin Serafino:

Thanks a lot for having me, Nate.

Nate Fisher:

So, we're in a new year, new administration, almost a year into Covid. What has HCPA been doing differently that you think would be helpful for other associations to know?

Kevin Serafino:

Well, one thing that I think we've been trying to do a lot more of, and it's something that associations usually do a pretty good amount of, but how we've been doing it and the reasons we've been doing it has changed. And I think that's surveying our members. So much has changed so quickly, and the way that people consume their information and communicate and gather. I mean so much has changed so rapidly that we don't always have a great sense of whether the programs and the information that we're delivering to our members is really hitting home.

Kevin Serafino:

So, we've been trying to put out a lot more surveys of our membership to understand how our virtual meeting went, whether people would want to participate in a virtual fly-in, webinar content ideas, travel plans. What their company will allow them to do or not do in terms of company travel.

Kevin Serafino:

So, we've been trying to do a lot more of that more so than we ever have, and to get a sense of how the changes throughout the pandemic have impacted the way that our members do business.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Kevin, for the importance of public policy, have you seen that be even more critical to your members throughout the pandemic?

Kevin Serafino:

Yeah, I think so. I think understanding the ways that our members prefer to communicate with public officials has been really illuminating for us. I think previously we had always struggled a little bit to get people to put their name on a piece of paper sending to a member of Congress. They let us do the work, and that's fine. But sometimes we like to have their face and their story and their personal connection to their member of Congress.

Kevin Serafino:

We're hoping that the shift to a lot more virtual engagement is ultimately going to be a good thing. It relieves the burden of having to have all our members travel to one place at once. We're in the process of setting up a virtual fly-in for the first time. But we're optimistic that we'll be able to get more

engagement on this kind of platform than we were able to before. I think a lot of virtual platforms we can eliminate some of the conflicting meeting schedules that we usually have in our big spring meeting that we normally do. So, we're optimistic and we think that it will fit generally with how our members like to communicate. So, again, we're looking forward to it.

Nate Fisher:

I do want to ask a little bit later about your virtual fly-in, because I think that's very interesting and ASE, we're doing a virtual fly-in too. And I know you've been to our fly-ins in the past. But you brought up the importance of members sharing their stories and their personal connections with their districts or their members of Congress. Can you talk a little more about how that's so important because I feel like this is something that every government relations person needs to know when they're on the Hill.

Kevin Serafino:

Yeah, and so the Household and Commercial Products Association represents the manufacturers and marketers and distributors of products that in some cases are essential for fighting the coronavirus. And we represent a pretty broad array of products, like cleaning products and anti-microbials, aerosols, floor care products, some of which are going to be considered more essential during a pandemic than others. So, I think there's a perception that all of our members, their companies are just doing insane business right now. In some cases that's true. Some of our members are selling more of some of their products than they ever thought possible. But they've also had to make a lot of sacrifices on other products to be able ramp up manufacturing on for example, disinfectants that are so important right now.

Kevin Serafino:

So, it's communicating those stories is really important to avoid the misconception that everything is hunky dory. It's still a very stressful time for business executives that they have to make these critical decisions about where to allocate their resources, reordering their supply chains. We thought a lot of the international trade and tariff policies were bad. The pandemic upended supply chains more than even some of those disruptive tariffs did.

Kevin Serafino:

So, being able to communicate that story in a compelling way with a personal touch is really important because a member of Congress my think that okay, I have this company in my district. I know they make cleaning products, or I know they make disinfectants. So, they're doing just fine. I don't have to worry about them. But little does that member of Congress know that that company maybe had to shut down other production lines in order to ramp up production on the disinfectant product.

Kevin Serafino:

So, it's making sure that misconceptions are addressed and that kind of gentle correction of the misconception I think just builds a stronger bond in the advocacy relationship because it's not saying, "oh no, you're totally wrong." It's like, "yes, but..." and really trying to deepen the level of understanding between the advocate and the public official. And that kind of advocacy I think is more important now than ever.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Kevin, what are your top priorities for the new year?

Kevin Serafino:

Some of our top priorities is really adapting to a new environment. And I think that has a couple different meanings. I mean the first environment is a new political environment. Obviously, a change of administration. Not just a change of administration but a change of party control in Washington. I think ultimately the Senate flipping to Democratic control as opposed to Republican, it's so narrow that we may not see a different policy outcome coming out of Washington, but we are going to see a much different process. I think that much we can be sure of.

Kevin Serafino:

I think we're going to see a lot more government transparency, a lot more investigations of a variety of topics, and a lot more of a different policy focus than we've been seeing over the past few years. So, it's being able to adapt to something that... a bit of an upending of business as usual in Washington, I think, is going to be important to ensure that our members' message is getting through, whatever that message is. It's going to be making sure that our connection to government officials survives this great upheaval.

Kevin Serafino:

I think some things are going to look boring in government, and I'm totally okay for that with that, for one. I think now when we were first just watching the first press conference of the new Biden administration, thinking to myself this is incredibly dull and I love every minute of it. I think some things are going to be mundane again and that is totally okay.

Kevin Serafino:

I think after kind of the reorienting to a new political reality, I think one of our priorities has got to be just making sure that the new found importance, or just newly discovered importance I guess, of a lot of our members' products continues to be understood on Capitol Hill, I think.

Kevin Serafino:

We want to make sure that policy makers really understand the importance and sometimes the fragility of supply chains. We're not just talking about international trade like I was before. But you never know how valuable a product is until you have to go to 18 different grocery stores trying to find toilet paper.

Kevin Serafino:

I think there's a lot that can be done in government to prepare for future business disruptions to prepare for the next pandemic and to make sure that the regulations that we are promoting or promulgating are looking towards the future. We don't want to wait until there's the next emergency to have these important discussions. And that's I think a lesson that Congress would do well to learn sooner rather than later. It seems that we stumble from one emergency to the next.

Kevin Serafino:

But I think what that looks like is having discussions about what worked in the pandemic in terms of our response, and what we can do better. And not offering criticism just to tear down a political response, but to really genuinely try to do better the next time around. I think there's a program at the EPA that ACPA were particularly involved in creating to address new emerging viral pathogens, and develop ways to certify new products to fight those viral pathogens. I think the EPA has now put up their list online

that they call it List N of products that are approved to fight the coronavirus. And it's become one of the most highly trafficked pages on the EPA website because consumers want to know these things. And that was a result of some previous pandemics.

Kevin Serafino:

So, we're looking forward to having conversations about how we can improve those kinds of programs to look forward to the next pandemic, the next major business disruption and just make sure that our members and their companies are prepared to weather any storm that might come their way.

Nate Fisher:

Well, speaking of adapting, I know you mentioned before that you guys are right now in the works of planning your first virtual fly-in. Can you talk a little bit about the value of fly-ins in general? And then specifically, how you guys are planning a virtual one?

Kevin Serafino:

Yeah, so I mean I think fly-ins are enormously important. And it's not just... I think they can be fun. I think they can be informative. But they're really valuable to establish a presence and to start building relationships. The value of that is pretty obvious.

Kevin Serafino:

But there are a lot of ways you can do it. The face-to-face connection is always going to be the most effective, I think. And even if that means doing it over Zoom, if that's the best we can do right now, then that's the best we'll do. I think sometimes it can be a bit of [00:40:09] the exercise for advocacy groups to say, "Oh, we had 500 members on Capitol Hill this week. And 700 meetings." And it comes down to [00:40:20] size and numbers.

Kevin Serafino:

So, I think that yes, we want to demonstrate some size and some impact there with those methods. But it goes a lot deeper than that. I think if one or two members of Congress or their key staffers remember a meeting favorably, and remember your advocates as helpful and informative and collaborative, then just a couple of those I think is going to be far more valuable than the hundreds of meetings that you're just trying to boost for the sake of numbers.

Kevin Serafino:

So, now maybe I'm saying that just because we're going to be having a small fly-in, but I truly do believe that. We've been trying to build it up over the past few years. I was surprised when I started at HCPA that they had never done a fly-in. It's such a cornerstone in so many association advocacy programs that we had a lot of work to do to get something kind of up and running and to really establish as a... not just the word team, but as a integral part of [inaudible 00:41:27] programs. Something that is built into the culture of the association so people know that it's coming. They look forward to it. They mark their calendar for that day of the year.

Kevin Serafino:

So, I think that's building that into the culture so that the association can build its advocacy in the long term I think is really important. And sometimes it comes through repetition and exposing members to that kind of in-person advocacy that they may not have done before.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Quality over quantity. I agree with you, Kevin. I think there can be a tendency for some folks to try to just check the box with the fly-in. But if you're not keenly on message with those Hill meetings, they can do damage. So, you have to make sure you're actually training your advocates well. And I think it's interesting, we've seen a trend towards smaller, issue-based fly-ins so you can get high level attendees. And that's really great as well.

Kevin Serafino:

I agree with you. I think it's all about the personal story and less about the skill of the advocate. I remember actually at an American Associations Day a couple years ago, I was paired with another attendee from a smaller state, who had never done an advocacy meeting before. They were from the state. I was not. I'm the professional advocate. They were not. But turns out that their message was so much more compelling than mine because they worked for a... I think it was a small travel and tourism bureau in their city. And they could talk about the real impact of associations. I mean, yes I work for one and I can talk about what we do on behalf of our members. But this woman is telling her member of Congress and their staff about all of the revenue that's coming into their city when associations host their meetings in those cities. Talking about the hotel rooms that are getting booked, the restaurants filling up.

Kevin Serafino:

So, that more of the story, and from a very green advocate. Somebody who had never been to Washington before was so much better than anything I could've done as a professional advocate. So, again I think that story really matters, and it's the quality that matters more than quantity.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

I love that. And that's a great point for people who haven't attended Hill meetings before. Don't be scared. It really is if you are talking about the impact in the district and the community that the legislator represents, that is the goal that they're looking for. So, we can always train people in how to do the Hill meetings. We just need your voice because you can't replicate it.

Kevin Serafino:

Absolutely. No, that's exactly right.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Well Kevin, thank you so much for joining us today.

Kevin Serafino:

Yeah, of course. Thanks for having me.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

This transcript was exported on Feb 09, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Thanks for listening to this episode of Stronger By Association. I think we had great conversations that really drive home the point, advocacy is as critical as ever and the transition to virtual has given us some new ways of working together that engage even more of our advocates.

Nate Fisher:

Yeah, and one of the big key take aways that I got from all of our panelists and guests was the importance of sharing your story and not just in advocacy in general. But especially this year, 2021, with everything going on and a new Congress and a new administration. And all of our guest confirmed that one of the best ways to do that is to participate in a fly-in, whether that is in-person or virtual, like so many of ours will be this year.

Nate Fisher:

So, with that, I hope everyone listening got excited and wants to sign up for American Associations Day. Again, March 25th and 26th 2021. You'll definitely be hearing from us of how to sign up. But if you want to sign up now or learn more, definitely go to [thepowerofa.org](http://thepowerofa.org).

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Thank you so much for listening. For more information visit [www.thepowerofa.org](http://www.thepowerofa.org) and stay tuned for more episodes.