

Marketing Commission

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The American Legion Marketing Commission was formed in October 2015 to strategize and execute the organization's activities to promote membership growth, strengthen the fundraising program, maximize merchandising opportunities, nurture corporate alliances and achieve greater brand awareness. In its first year, the commission also oversaw multiple initiatives to better integrate marketing efforts executed by all divisions and to provide professional support for departments, districts, counties and posts.

Critical to the first-year effort has been the development of digital media infrastructure that aims to improve the user experience for those who wish to learn about The American Legion, join, donate, buy merchandise, engage in a corporate alliance or participate in programs. A new American Legion national website design and architecture was installed in April 2016 to stimulate visitation and access via mobile devices. That effort produced a 74.3 percent increase in visitation in the month of July alone, year over year, and a jump from 7 percent to 34 percent of access to legion.org via mobile devices. Increases in online joining and renewal were reflective of the visitation growth. The new infrastructure is designed in such a way that departments, districts, counties and posts can replicate it to better synergize the user experience and improve brand cohesion at every level. A pilot project to develop a department and local version of the architecture is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2016. A similar effort is under way to standardize the MyLegion.org platform, a members-only area of the national digital media program that includes membership administration.

Along with the development of new architecture and user interface has come the creation of an integrated database of American Legion registered web users. This effort includes the migration of more than 200,000 data files into one cloud base so that visitors can receive tailored messaging based on their interests and behavior and log on for web services using just one username and password.

As these developments have occurred, the commission has overseen day-to-day performance in key areas of the organization's business, including membership, fundraising, corporate relationships, merchandising and branding. Tactical highlights under those headings are as follows:

- Membership

National staff, with guidance and support from outside agencies and the Membership & Post Activities Division, developed a one-stop membership platform on Legion.org, eliminating outdated content and setting plans for new materials to ease the work of local recruiters and convert site visitors into members. Through this effort, and in collaboration with the national Membership & Post Activities Committee, the staff has begun development of several new membership promotional tools for delivery in print and digital media at every level. New membership recruitment training videos and materials are also in production.

The commission oversees the organization's national Direct Membership Solicitation (DMS) program and exceeded the budgeted target for 2016 by signing up 111,105 new and re-enlisted members (those whose memberships had expired). The new DMS marketing campaign is now under way with a target of 122,000. Another service managed under the Marketing Commission's guidance is the Direct Renewal program – mailings of dues notices to members and the delivery of member benefits promotions.

- Fundraising

A shift in the business model on department fundraising – where National Headquarters conducts all or some of a department's fundraising functions – turned a \$36,000 deficit in this area into a \$190,000 net positive return between 2015 and 2016. The key shift that occurred is the splitting of fundraising revenues after an agreed-upon target is exceeded, as negotiated between national and the departments.

The national fundraising program, designed to grow a database of donors from outside the general American Legion membership, produced \$1.7 million in net revenue for 2015 and is on schedule to exceed that by the end of 2016. The donor file now stands at approximately 350,000, and efforts are under way to compensate American Legion departments whose members contribute to the national program at the same time they are receiving offers to give from department fundraising programs.

A new planned giving platform was developed by staff and contracted agencies to provide opportunities for memorial bequests and other estate gifts. A brochure to promote planned giving was produced in May, and the new platform went live in late August.

- Corporate Relationships

The member discount provider program was overhauled in early 2016 to require a minimum \$25,000 annual commitment from participating companies. The change ensures that those companies which provide member discounts also market them to members through American Legion media and other opportunities, such as convention presence.

As new corporate relationships have been negotiated, development of existing relationships with USAA, AbbVie and Walgreen's has been cultivated. Relationships with multiple other potential corporate alliances are now in development, including Harley-Davidson and the Discovery Channel, which conducted a special event at the kickoff to the 2016 Legacy Run to raise scholarship funds for children of military personnel who died on duty on or after Sept. 11, 2001, and those who sustained 50-percent or greater service-related disabilities since the war on terrorism began.

- Merchandising

The American Legion Emblem Committee reports to the Marketing Commission and documented \$8.59 million in sales through the first seven months of 2016, down slightly for the same period in 2015. The American Legion Flag Rewards Program, meanwhile, continues to grow. Participants are awarded credits for flag purchases through Emblem Sales. More than 1,500 American Legion posts participate in the program, which has seen a 3 percent sales increase year to date in 2016, through June 30. Total sales amounted to \$1,514,000 over that period through the program, including revenues of \$109,400 through email marketing alone.

- Brand Awareness

The American Legion National Headquarters has developed a team of staff members and agencies to improve brand awareness through high-profile events, such as the Legacy Run, Salute to Heroes Inaugural Ball, National Convention, American Legion Baseball World Series and major Veterans Day parades in New York City and Los Angeles, as well as the 500 Festival Parade in Indianapolis.

Media attention to these and other American Legion activities have been cultivated through multiple alerts, personal contact with media outlets and message-point strategies for national participants at the events. Staff and agencies have supported improved engagement with outside media.

The American Legion Marketing Commission is now working with staff and agencies to establish long-term strategic plans to deliver an effective, cohesive and best-in-class marketing program that maintains the integrity of the organization and its legacy while applying the most modern tools of communication.

