

# Organization of State Broadcasting Executives

Member Survey – Strategic Direction

February, 2012

## **Executive Summary:**

*Regular, in-face, structured meetings. Frank and open discussions among peers. Issues that matter to state networks.*

The following report is intended to summarize the feedback your current co-chairs have received, through phone calls and an online poll, regarding current OSBE practice and policy, with an eye to directing our activities in the months and years ahead. Rather than list responses to the questions we posed, we have attempted to summarize what we heard in a form conducive to quick consumption. In the spirit of keeping OSBE a relevant and valuable resource for its members, we will endeavor to use this feedback to structure our meetings in the coming year.

## **What makes OSBE valuable?**

### **What's working?**

At its core, OSBE is unique and valuable largely because it provides a safe environment for a relatively small group of members and peers to exchange information, discuss common issues, and learn from one another. While some members believe that opening the group up a bit to allow for proxy representation would not alter this dynamic and might be a positive change, others value stricter controls on attendance as a part of the OSBE culture.

The best OSBE meetings are ones in which members return home with ideas that they can directly apply to their stations and networks. Creating a forum for open discussion is critical, but directing that discussion to keep it focused on specific issues is also important.

Finally, the camaraderie that OSBE fosters is important to many of its members. It provides an immediate peer group for new managers, can serve an orientation purpose for those new to public media, and also helps to maintain and strengthen relationships that lead to a sense of community within public broadcasting. This quality is unique to OSBE and valuable to its members.

### **What's not working?**

Many of the concerns and perceived shortcomings of OSBE are centered on outside perceptions of the group, a drop in participation in the group, and the group's lack of influence in the public broadcasting community. Over the years, OSBE has at times been more/less formal, more/less focused, and more/less social. Criticisms voiced include:

- The "old boy's club" image
- Lack of perceived structure

- Lack of activity, and pro-activity, in regard to system policy

These factors have perhaps led to a lack of participation by some GMs. In turn, their absence from OSBE has contributed to a sense that OSBE is not as relevant as it once was.

One member questioned why, with so many dual-licensees in the group, is OSBE so television centric. Perhaps topics related to radio licensees would be appropriate for OSBE.

Meeting fatigue is a big issue with respondents. It is clear that OSBE's value is tied to its regular in-face meetings, so fewer meetings is not a solution for OSBE. Instead, focused meetings that result in good discussion, actionable ideas, and more direct influence on system policy, seem to be what is recommended.

### **What would make OSBE better?**

In short, meetings with a specific agenda focused on the unique demands, challenges, and opportunities facing state networks.

### **Key Issues for the coming year:**

- Sustainability
- Spectrum policy
- Responding to declines in state funding and heading off future attacks
- The possible loss of federal funding
- Mergers and collaborations
- How do we preserve the PBS service and still maintain localism?
- Infrastructure funding (post PTFP, DDF, RUS)
- Local programming strategies
- Mobile technology
- Common shared service opportunities, DVD fulfillment, website, education procurement, etc...

### **State funding summary:**

OSBE members are all over the map when it comes to receiving state funding, the level of that funding, and how it is appropriated. A future discussion on different state approaches to appropriation might be really interesting, particularly if it led to some new options for members to consider.

### **State level advocacy:**

Not surprisingly, those OSBE members that receive state funding support handle state level advocacy in many different ways. Paid lobbyists do not play a role in OSBE members' legislative strategies; most communication responsibility falls on the members themselves. University Licensees typically have university lobbyists, but those individuals advocate for a large number of Higher Education priorities, with varying degrees of responsiveness to the state broadcasters.

Some OSBE members coordinate and work with other public broadcasters, radio and television alike. At least one has lobbyists willing to work pro-bono.

Some members are far more aggressive than others in communicating directly with state legislators. A recurring theme was the importance of regular communication, particularly between sessions. Some members insure that all state representatives receive regular mailings from the station, magazines, program guides, and even targeted mailings to signal station value. Some members actively recruit state legislators and spouses for their boards. Other ideas included: a monthly governor's press conference, strong ties to other state agencies through contracted production work, participation in state broadcasting associations and events.

For state networks, grass roots support is a challenge due to the large geographic areas served. Mobilizing grass roots activity might be an interesting future topic of discussion.

### **Community engagement for state support:**

OSBE members use a variety of different approaches to enlisting community support in lobbying for state funding. This includes utilizing board members, Community Advisory boards, volunteers and donors. One respondent has developed a list of these individuals over the years and cross references it with legislators to effectively communicate on specific issues.

### **State networks and localism:**

Perhaps it goes without saying, but OSBE members "view their state as their community." Localism is predictably accomplished largely through local productions, often with geographical diversity as a stated goal. Increasingly, state networks are also focusing online and interactive projects at specific communities, as well as outreach projects. One respondent said "without our state network, we couldn't provide local services in our state."

Examples of local productions included:

- Nightly primetime shows
- Weekly tourism shows
- State magazine shows ("Hometown Stories," "Backroads of Montana," etc...)
- Museum shows
- Town meetings in regional centers
- High school and collegiate athletics

Some networks have distributed staff; many do not.

State networks that include radio licensees can leverage radio resources across the state to increase localism.

### **Advantages of the state network model:**

In a word, efficiency. Through a state network, one organization can serve the entire state, multiple DMA's, and regions. There is greater fundraising efficiency as donors have one primary organization to support and there is not the competition among multiple organizations chasing the same dollars. Marketing, promotion and brand management is easier as there is less chance for brand dilution within the market or DMA among multiple organizations. For small communities served by state networks, it would simply not be affordable to "do it" on a community level.

**OSBE's appropriate role in system policy:**

There is significant feeling among respondents that OSBE should work to improve its current image within the system and among members and promote itself better as a key and influential affinity group, representing a large segment of our system. It should be more proactive in offering positions and taking stands on important issues, be a thought leader by providing advice on the future role and direction of the system. As important as Education is to OSBE, we need to demonstrate to the system that we are not simply organizations that receive a lot of state funding to do mandated formal education in our states, but rather we are much more than that.

A number of respondents indicated that their own network might serve as an example for others. State networks can demonstrate how, by reducing management overhead inherent in multiple licensee situations, stations can deliver more localized service with less money. There is a sense by some in the system that such consolidation would be tantamount to shutting down or giving up localism, when in fact OSBE member stations demonstrate that the opposite is true. Current system (CSG) policy would seem to be an impediment to future consolidation efforts, so perhaps the time is right for OSBE to have a voice in suggesting future policy.