

# Regional Franchise Business Network Program Initiates Grassroots Lobbying

*By Lane Fisher*

The International Franchise Association (IFA) has long recognized that in order to be an effective trade association, it must undertake lobbying and networking activities on a regional basis. In 1979, IFA implemented its first regional program known as “Second Tuesday,” where regional meetings in each market were coordinated on the second Tuesday of each quarter.

Since 1979, IFA’s regional meeting programs have been a successful recruitment and retention tool. In regions where these programs are successful, IFA added countless new members and enhanced the perceived member value for existing members. Experience shows that once members of prospective members get involved with IFA, they immediately justify the cost of their dues, because they appreciate the benefits of membership. IFA’s local programs have been designed to elicit the maximum local member participation from each of IFA’s forum members.

In 2001, IFA completely revamped its Franchise Business Network (FBN) Program to accomplish six primary functions:

- create networking opportunities and foster business-to-business relationships for the local franchise community;
- offer affordable educational programs to the local franchise community;
- create a unified local voice for franchising;
- create a political grassroots network to address small business issues;
- sponsor and support community nonprofit, philanthropic, educational and developmental programs that enhance the image of franchising; and
- recruit new and retain current IFA members.

Obviously, none of these functions can exist without the last, so much of the effort undertaken for the FBN program is designed with recruitment and retention in mind.

Regional FBN meetings provide a local forum for franchisors, franchisees, and suppliers to exchange ideas and share their own experiences with their contemporaries. Simply stated, IFA seeks to bring the local franchise community together at face-to-face meetings to network and learn from franchise-specific educational programs. It is also an opportunity for franchisee, franchisor and supplier forum members, who cannot always get away from the day-to-day operation of their businesses, to attend annual out-of-state events (like the legal symposium or annual convention), an opportunity to play an active role in an IFA event, and to become part of a group organized locally to lobby for IFA legislative and regulatory causes.

In 2002, IFA will use the FBN program to supplement and reinforce the lobbying activities undertaken in Washington D.C. as part of National Franchising Week and Franchise Appreciation Day. IFA will also make available its grassroots training manual to educate FBN participants on effective methods of lobbying.

Local franchisors with a large presence in the area, and often existing relationships with federal and state legislators, will be asked to combine their efforts with franchisees and suppliers to form a unified delegation to undertake in-district grassroots lobbying efforts. IFA will use the FBN's lobbying delegation to educate legislators on IFA's position concerning franchise relationship legislation and other legislative issues affecting the franchise community.

In 2001, the number of states participating in IFA's FBN Program grew by twenty-five percent, giving IFA representation in twenty-six major markets.

The 2002 Program will be IFA's most aggressive regional expansion program and will likely change the way that IFA lobbies to protect franchise interests. It is critical that IFA representation in each major market, and particularly in any market in which the federal franchise relationship legislation has support. Although organizing meetings is a considerable amount of work, in many markets, through unprecedented partnerships, between supplier competitors and franchisors, and in fewer cases franchisees, IFA has created a balanced grassroots lobbying team. If you want to protect your rights in your jurisdiction, you must be active. I urge you to participate in regional meetings as a guest or host. If you work in a jurisdiction which has no FBN meeting, we hope you will make a New Year's resolution to take charge and organize a regional IFA program.