

UNITED STATES CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

ACCREDITATION

Accreditation Application for State Chambers

Section 7: Communications



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Updated - January 2013

Accreditation Overview

Welcome

Welcome to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Accreditation application program. We are excited that you are interested in standing out from the crowd and moving ahead. We want to help you through the Accreditation process by explaining our procedures, walking you through the steps to complete the materials, and clarifying what you can expect from us.

The Accreditation Application is divided into nine sections with a complete set of instructions at the beginning of each one. If you have already completed a section and you are familiar with the instructions, click on the Governance Overview icon in the Bookmark Section to the left of your screen. Otherwise, the background and instructions should be reviewed in detail starting with the Accreditation Overview, below.

Accreditation History

In 1964, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce began offering its Accreditation Program to state and local chambers of commerce nationwide. The program was designed to provide a continuous self-analysis of an organization's growth and development, with an opportunity for the organization to reassess its objectives and resources, program of work, procedures, and achievements. Since the Accreditation program's launch, more than 750 chambers have met the required organizational standards and have earned the title "Accredited."

Accreditation means that a local or state chamber of commerce has been recognized by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for having sound programs and organizational procedures and for continually creating and maintaining positive change in the community.

The U.S. Chamber Accreditation program establishes criteria for judging the quality of performance for state and local chambers of commerce, determines the extent to which organizations meet these criteria, and issues a public announcement that organizations are found to be of superior quality.

The U.S. Chamber understands that state and local chambers are diverse and have unique programs of work, operations, merit, dues structure, and program policies. As a result, the Accreditation program has separated the state chamber Accreditation process from the local chamber Accreditation process. Distinct applications have been created to recognize these differences.

Accreditation does not mean that an organization is perfect in every respect. Competent examiners acknowledge the quality of an organization and make recommendations where there are areas of deficiency and recognize chambers for areas of special distinction.

Effective chambers of commerce operate above and beyond minimum standards. As each chamber prepares its Accreditation application, it seeks ways of improving its performance in the community. These criteria or standards become a tool for management control and self-discipline.

Mission

The mission of the Accreditation program is to establish a standard of organizational competency and an objective set of criteria for assessment. The achievement of standards by state and local chambers as determined by an examining committee will be recognized with Accreditation by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Procedures to Apply

We want to make sure you are properly entered in our database. If you have not yet entered your contact information, click here <https://www.uschamber.com/intent-apply-accreditation> and follow the steps.

Upon receipt, U.S. Chamber staff will enter the information into a database, allowing the applicant chamber to receive updates about the Accreditation process and invitations to conference calls discussing the application process. **Do not send the program fee at this time.**

If clicking the link doesn't work, make sure your computer is set up to access the Internet and try again. If you still experience difficulty, call Ali Ehrlich at (202) 463-5760.

Access the Application Documents

There are nine sections of the Accreditation application:

1. Governance
2. Finance
3. Human Resources and Staff
4. Government Affairs
5. Program Development
6. Technology
7. Communication
8. Facilities
9. Benchmarking

Copies of all nine sections of the Accreditation application can be found on our website at <https://www.uschamber.com/members/chambers/accreditation/state-chamber-application>.

These files can be completed by one person at the chamber or distributed to other chamber staff or volunteers to assist in the ultimate completion of the application.

To assist in distributing the files, chamber staff or volunteers may go directly to the website to download the sections of interest to them.

No matter how many staff members or volunteers are working on the application, the chamber's designated staff contact person should be the only one to communicate with the U.S. Chamber staff.

Review the Application

Review the application in its entirety — all nine sections — to determine whether the chamber is prepared to begin the Accreditation process. Use the glossary at the end of the each file to familiarize yourself with the language of the application. Glossary items can also be accessed by clicking on highlighted text. In the glossary a link is provided to return to the highlighted text.

Complete the Application Documents

Each applicant chamber is required to complete all nine sections of the Accreditation application.

Each of the application's nine sections is a self-contained document including:

- Application instructions and overview
- Section's standards as defined by the U.S. Chamber
- A list of minimum qualifications to achieve Accreditation for that section
- A checklist of attachments
- A digital application form

Please note: The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Accreditation application is purposely divided into sections for ease of use and scoring. For this reason, we ask that you not modify the PDFs in any way (i.e. merging sections together, adding pages, removing pages, etc.).

The digital application form is divided into two categories; the minimum requirements which must be met for the chamber to be Accredited, and the additional criteria which will be evaluated to determine the star ranking of an Accredited chamber.

Complete the Conclusion and Signature Page

The Conclusion and Signature Page can be found on our website <https://www.uschamber.com/members/chambers/accreditation/state-chamber-application>. The U.S. Chamber requires two copies of this document; a hard copy of this form with signatures authorizing payment, as well as a digital copy for processing. The digital copy should remain "clickable" in order to be processed correctly (i.e., the text boxes should be blue and remain active).

Prepare the Application Materials for Delivery

Copy the nine pdf files and the conclusion page and signature page to a CD or USB drive. Print and sign the completed Conclusion and Signature Pages, and enclose the payment form with a signed check or credit card information for \$699 for U.S. Chamber members; \$1,199 for non members.

Mail the Application Materials to the U.S. Chamber

The application materials should be put into an envelope with the completed Conclusion and Signature Pages and the payment and mailed to:

Ali Ehrlich IOM, CAE
Director of Operations
Political Affairs and Federation Relations
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
1615 H Street, NW
Washington, DC 20062-2000

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Review Process

Review

Once the completed application and program fee have been received, U.S. Chamber staff will review the chamber's submission for minimum requirements. Due to the volume of applications received, we ask that you please do not contact the U.S. Chamber to inquire about the status of the chamber's application. In the event that minimum requirements have not been met or there are missing materials, U.S. Chamber staff will contact you.

An experienced Accreditation consultant will review the application and make recommendations. The consultant may contact the applicant to ask questions that might arise during the review. Based on the findings, a confidential report with recommendations will be prepared and sent to the Accrediting board, the governing body of the Accreditation program made up of business and chamber executives. The Accrediting board will review the recommendations and approve or disapprove the chamber's Accreditation status.

Recommendations will be presented to the Accrediting board at the February, June, and November board meetings. The day following the Accrediting board meeting, the applicant will be notified about the chamber's Accreditation status.

Awards

All Accredited chambers must meet the minimum requirements for each section of the application. Upon meeting these requirements, the chamber will be granted Accredited status. If the applicant completed the additional criteria sections of the application, the Accreditation consultant will review the additional material and designate the chamber as Accredited with Distinction, if the chamber earns at least 90% of the total number of additional criteria points available.

Post Accreditation Materials

Upon receiving Accreditation, the chamber will receive a marketing kit with the following:

- Letter of congratulations from Tom Donohue, U.S. Chamber President and CEO
- Press release
- Certificate of achievement
- Recommendations for improvement
- Sample newsletter articles and Web page blurbs
- Camera-ready logos
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce resource guide

Each chamber receiving Accreditation will be acknowledged on the U.S. Chamber's website.

Maintaining Accreditation

To maintain Accreditation, a chamber must submit an Accreditation application every five years. Chambers will receive an email from U.S. Chamber staff during the fourth year of Accreditation. It will remind them of the need to renew and provide links to the materials required for the renewal.

Confidentiality

The U.S. Chamber agrees to maintain the confidentiality of information received throughout this application except in cases where (1) the information is or becomes publicly known from sources other than the application itself (2) the information is received by the U.S. Chamber without restriction from a third party (3) the information is independently developed by the U.S. Chamber, or (4) the information is disclosed by the U.S. Chamber pursuant to judicial action.

Tech Support

Navigation

The Accreditation application uses bookmark navigation to assist the applicant in navigating the application. Please note that the pages of this file are divided in two. The left-hand side presents “bookmarks” that can be used to take you directly to specific pages in the document. Clicking on the triangle beside the bookmarks will “open them up” and provide you with a more detailed set of bookmarks for the section.

If you have had no experience with this type of navigation, give it a try and become comfortable with it before going on.

Completing Each Section

“Yes/No” Radio Buttons

Radio buttons — ☐ — are used for “yes/no” questions. If you inadvertently click a “yes” button, you can change your answer by clicking on the “no” button, and vice-versa. Radio buttons are also used to “check off” items on a list. If you inadvertently click a “check off” button, you can change your answer by clicking it a second time.

Short Answers

Space is provided to enter short answers. For example, the question, “In which government jurisdiction is the chamber’s incorporation or charter filed?” should be answered like this:

Washington, D.C.

In some cases, the answer may exist in another file. It can be copied and pasted into the text box.

Where the answer is best provided by entering the entire file, the file can be attached, see below.

Attachments

In each section you are required to provide Attachments to support the application. Instructions for making the Attachments follow. Note that you can terminate the process before it is complete by pressing the escape key (ESC).

Digital files

If the attachment is a digital file in a common format (Microsoft Word, Excel, Powerpoint; Adobe Acrobat pdf, etc.), the file can be attached electronically. Each attachment has an “attachment area” that looks like this:

Attachment: _____

A reminder of the instructions to attach a file can be accessed by clicking the ? icon.

Steps for Making Attachments

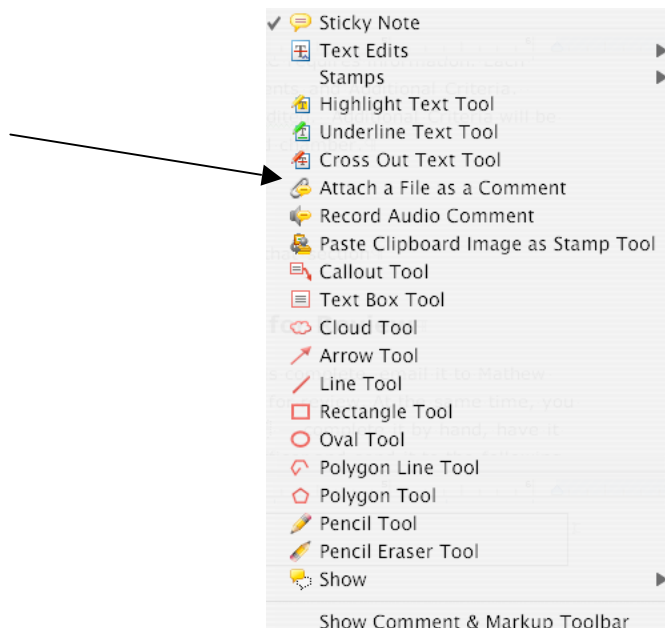
1. Go to the menu at the top of the screen. It looks like this:

Adobe Reader File Edit View Document Tools Window Help

2. Click on "Tools" and a drop-down menu will appear. It looks like this:

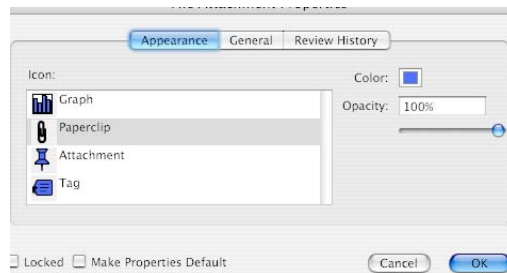


3. Drag the cursor over the words "Comment & Markup" to show the next drop-down menu. It looks like this:



4. Click on the line "Attach a File as a Comment." The arrow points to it. Click anywhere in the "Attachment Area" to trigger your computer's operating system to open.
5. Find the file you want to attach and click on it.

6. Click on the "Select" button at the bottom of the window in your operating system and a new window will appear that looks like this:



7. Click on the "Paperclip" icon, and click the "OK" button.

A "Paperclip" will appear in the "Attachment Area." Clicking on this icon will open the file you have attached. If you want to unattach the file, select the icon with your cursor and hit the delete key.

Printed Files

If your document is in printed form and no digital copy is available, it can be converted to a pdf file by having it scanned. Converting printed files to digital format is the best way to deal with these attachments.

If you cannot have the file scanned, you can send it to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in its printed form. The U.S. Chamber will have it scanned and attached to your application document for a fee of \$1.00 a page.

Essays

Space is provided to enter essays. They must be as thorough as possible and the space will expand to accommodate essays of up to 1,000 words. Each essay response must be as thorough as possible.

The space can accommodate text only. If your essay already exists in a digital format, you can save time by including it as an attachment. If you would like to include tables, charts, or graphs in this section as a way to better clarify or enhance the essays, you can put them into a digital format and attach the file.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

- Q We have documents that we think the U.S. Chamber of Commerce should review but there is no place for them to be attached in any of the sections.
- A An area has been provided at the end of Section Nine — Benchmarking — where additional attachments can be made. Please note that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce will review these items but may not include them in the basic scoring of the application. However, if the material is noteworthy or exemplifies an industry best practice, it may be eligible to receive discretionary points that may affect the chamber's star rating.
- Q There are places where we would like to add a comment but there is no text box available.
- A Generally speaking, text boxes are made available where additional information is needed to determine the chamber's level of compliance. However, if an applicant would like to insert more information, the applicants can always use Adobe Acrobat Reader's "Sticky Note" feature to insert a comment anywhere in the application forms. To access this feature click on the Tools menu at the top of your screen and slide the cursor down to "Comment and Markup." A list of features will appear with "Sticky Note" at the top. Click on the "Sticky Note" icon then move your cursor to the place in the document where you would like to make a comment. Click again and the "Sticky Note" will appear. Write your comment in the space provided then click anywhere in the document to continue.
- Q Completing the forms is time-consuming. Will we have to redo everything when it is time to renew our accreditation?
- A The set of nine pdf files should be kept in a safe place, with backup copies available elsewhere. At renewal, use the original set of pdf files, make changes only and save them under a new name, e.g. Section One – Governance 20??. This new set of files is then sent to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for review. No need to completely redo the forms.
- Q We have very large files on separate media and cannot attach them to a pdf file.
- A These files can be submitted on separate media (CDs, DVDs, USB drives, etc.) and enclosed in the same envelope used to send the nine sections to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Accreditation fee. A note should be included to indicate what the files are and the section of the application forms to which they apply.

Q Can more than one person be involved in completing the forms? How would this be done?

A While it is best for one person to coordinate the process and serve as the communicator with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, many chambers will want to involve more than one person. Chambers will often distribute the pdf file for certain sections to specialists who are responsible for completing them. For example, Section Two – Finance may be given to the CFO who completes it and sends it back to the person coordinating the application for the chamber.

7. Communications

Standard

An Accredited chamber has identified target audiences within its membership and has devised a clear and strategic plan to communicate with them. Additionally, the chamber has developed a marketing plan to highlight chamber activities to the public and create awareness of the chamber's local mission.

Minimum Qualifications

- Maintains and uses a written communications and marketing plan with clear annual goals
- Uses diverse forms of media to promote the chamber, its services, and events
- Contacts members at least monthly
- Uses the chamber's website to communicate chamber information
- Communicates with members using mass-distribution email (html-enabled preferred)
- Complies with federal CAN-SPAM requirements
- Writes press releases for media throughout the region or state

Minimum Requirement Attachment Checklist

- ☐ A 7.1 Communications and marketing plan

Additional Criteria Attachment Checklist

- ☐ A 7.2 Style guide or graphic guidelines for chamber publications

Section 7: Communications Minimum Requirements

A. Marketing Strategies

1. Does the chamber have a communications and marketing plan? ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Does the marketing plan include annual goals? ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ **A 7.1 Include a copy of the [communications and marketing plan](#)ⁱ.**

Attachment : _____

B. Marketing and Communications Material

1. Which of the following does the chamber have? Are these available online? How often are these items produced?

	Print	Online	Frequency
i. Magazine (if applicable)	☐	☐	_____
ii. Membership or electronic newsletter	☐	☐	_____
iii. Press releases or media advisories	☐	☐	_____
iv. Products and services marketing pieces	☐	☐	_____
v. Website home page		☐	_____

2. Are communications to members distributed at least monthly? ☐ Yes ☐ No

C. World Wide Web and Electronic Communications

3. Indicate which of the following is available on the chamber website? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Basic chamber information including telephone number and address
- ☐ Staff contact list
- ☐ Board and Committee roster
- ☐ Upcoming events

2. Does the chamber use member communication software for html-enabled mass-distribution e-mails? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Is the chamber compliant with federal CAN-SPAM requirements? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Enter your website address in the space provided. _____

D. Media

1. Approximately how many press releases are sent annually? _____
2. Approximately how many [media advisories](#)ⁱⁱ are sent annually? _____
3. How are press releases and media advisories distributed? (Check all that apply)
☐ Electronically ☐ Faxed ☐ Other _____
4. How broad is the distribution of press releases? (Check all that apply)
☐ Local ☐ Regional ☐ State ☐ National

Section 7: Communications Additional Criteria

A. Marketing Strategies

1. Does the communications and marketing plan include a strategy for each program and service? ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. List the targeted audiences mentioned in the marketing plan.

3. Does the communications and marketing plan include a strategy for targeted audiences? ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Does the communications and marketing plan include benchmarks to determine the success of marketing efforts? ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. Which methods are included in the communication and marketing plan? (Check all that apply)

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| ☐ Direct mail | ☐ Email | ☐ Instant Messaging |
| ☐ Local newspaper | ☐ Magazines | ☐ Meetings |
| ☐ Regional newspaper | ☐ Newsletters | ☐ Paid social media advertising |
| ☐ Online directory | ☐ Personal contact | ☐ Radio/PSA |
| ☐ Signage | ☐ TV | ☐ Website |
| ☐ Brochures | ☐ Blogs | ☐ Social Media |
| ☐ LinkedIn | ☐ Branded promotional items | ☐ Other _____ |
| ☐ Press conferences | ☐ Town Hall | |

B. Marketing and Communications Materials

1. Does the chamber have a style guide or graphic guidelines for all chamber publications? ☐ Yes ☐ No

A 7.2 If yes, include a copy of the [style guide or graphic guidelines](#)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Attachment : _____

2. Is the chamber's logo and stationery consistent with the image of the chamber? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Is the look of all programs and services consistent? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Is the marketing message of all products and services consistent? ☐ Yes ☐ No

C. World Wide Web and Electronic Communications

1. Which of the following is available on the chamber website? (Check all that apply)
 - a. ☐ Online membership directory
 - b. ☐ Online membership directory for local chambers and/or associations
 - c. ☐ Current chamber publications (e.g. annual report, newsletters, magazines)
 - d. ☐ Policy issues and positions
 - e. ☐ Membership application
 - f. ☐ Press releases or "in the news" alerts
 - g. ☐ Links to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce website
 - h. ☐ Links to articles about the chamber
 - i. ☐ Links to business resources
 - j. ☐ Archives of past chamber publications
 - k. ☐ Members-only section with username and password
 - l. ☐ Referral section (i.e., where someone can refer a colleague or business)
 - m. ☐ Intranet message board or listserv for the chamber's members
 - n. ☐ Online information request form
 - o. ☐ Board documents (e.g. bylaws and committee structures)
2. Are Web statistics (e.g. the number of hits on the chamber's overall site) tracked? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Are Web statistics (e.g. the number of hits on each individual page of the chamber's website) tracked? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Does the chamber have an email address for general chamber inquiries (e.g., info@thischamber.com)? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - a. If yes, is it monitored and responded to daily? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Do all employee email addresses include the chamber's Web address rather than an AOL, Hotmail, or other public addresses (e.g., jsmith@usachamber.com)? ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Does the chamber track the "open" rate of sent chamber electronic communications? ☐ Yes ☐ No
7. Where is the chamber's website address listed? (check all that apply)
 - ☐ All chamber mailings (e.g. newsletters, brochures, annual reports, etc.)
 - ☐ Business cards
 - ☐ Letterhead
 - ☐ Meeting registration forms
 - ☐ Member application
 - ☐ All novelty products (pens, mugs, T-shirts, etc.)
 - ☐ Bottom of all email signatures

D. Media

1. Is there a staff person responsible for working with the media? ☐ Yes ☐ No

a. If yes, please list staff name and title

2. Has staff and leadership received media training?

☐ Yes ☐ No

a. If yes, please list the name and title of each staff member.

3. How many op-eds written by the chamber are published annually? This may include print and online chamber publications (including but not limited to Twitter, Facebook or a blog), as well as trade publications and credible 3rd party publications.

4. In the last year, how many articles about the chamber or the chamber's staff have been featured in the media which may include print and online newspapers, trade publications and credible 3rd party publications?

E. Member Communication

1. What is the members' preferred method of communication? (Check only one)

☐ Telephone ☐ Email ☐ Mail

2. Does the chamber have the technology and resources to only communicate with members via their preferred method?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Supplementary Information

Applicants can use this page to enter or attach supplementary information not required by the application.

Please note that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce will review the materials, but does not score supplementary information either as a part of the application process or as a basis for designating the chamber as Accredited or Accredited with Distinction.

Supplementary information may be awarded up to five discretionary points as deemed by the Accreditation consultant for exceptional policies or best practices.

Comments can be entered in the space below.

Additional documents can be attached here : _____

ⁱ **Communications and marketing plan:** The Accrediting Board requires that the application create a thorough communications and marketing plan. The communications and marketing plan is a document that details the chamber's strategy to communicate with members and advertise the chamber's programs, products, and services. For sample communications and marketing plans, refer to the best practices Web page at <https://www.uschamber.com/members/chambers/accreditation/best-practices>.

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ⁱⁱ **Media advisories:** Are used to alert the media about an upcoming event or news story. Media advisories may lead to the media being present to report on a chamber event. Media advisories are not as detailed as press releases, which are used to communicate the entire news story.

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ⁱⁱⁱ **Style guide or graphic guidelines:** Outlines the standards for design and/or writing for a chamber and its publications. For style or graphic guidelines, refer to the best practices Web page at <https://www.uschamber.com/members/chambers/accreditation/best-practices>.

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