

Lobbying: The Basics

Targeting Legislators

Lobbying legislators is about persuading them to do what you want. There are five main categories of legislators to think about, each requiring its own special strategy:

1. Champions

All issues need a group of lawmakers dedicated to being tireless, committed advocates for your cause. What they can do for you is make the case to their colleagues, help develop a strong "inside" strategy, and be visible public spokespeople. What they need is good information, and visible support outside the Capitol.

2. Allies

Another group of legislators will be on your side but can be pushed to do more -- to speak up in party caucuses or on the floor.

3. Fence Sitters

Some legislators will be uncommitted on the issues, potentially able to vote either way. These are your key targets and lobbying strategy is about putting together the right mix on "inside" persuasion and "outside" pressure to sway them your way.

4. Mellow Opponents

Another group of legislators will be clear votes against you, but who are not inclined to be active on the issue. With this group what's key is to keep them from becoming more active, lobbying them enough to give them pause but not to make them angry.

5. Hard Core Opponents

Finally, there are those lawmakers who are leading your opposition. What is important here is to isolate them, to highlight the extremes of their positions, rhetoric and alliances and to give other lawmakers pause about joining with them.

"Inside" vs. "Outside" Lobbying

Effective lobbying requires a coordination of two very different kinds of lobbying activity:

"Inside" Lobbying

One form of lobbying takes place in the Capitol. It includes a mix of the following:

- Meetings with lawmakers and legislative staff
- Providing analysis and information to committees and legislative offices
- Testifying in committee
- Negotiating with policy makers and other lobby groups

For the most part this type of lobbying is carried out by or in coordination with advocates who work on a regular basis at the Capitol.

"Outside" Lobbying

An effective lobbying campaign also requires activity outside the Capitol, aimed at shifting the politics and pressure around the issue. Some of these activities include:

- Media activity including news conferences, editorial board visits, and assisting reporters with stories
- Local lobbying visits by constituents to their legislators
- Building broad and diverse coalitions
- Letter writing campaigns to legislators
- Grassroots activity such as rallies, etc.

It is important that these kinds of "outside" lobbying activities be coordinated with "inside" lobbying activity, to assure that they make strategic sense in terms of timing, targeting, messages, etc.

Six Practical Tips on How to Lobby Your Legislator or Elected Official:

1. Establish your agenda and goals.

- Know what subject you are going to address. Don't overload with issues -- stick to no more than two or three.
- Decide what you would like to get out of the visit, i.e., a commitment to vote for your issue, leadership on the issue, or you may decide the visit is simply informational.
- Allow time for small talk at the outset, but not too much. Remember, it's your visit.
- If it is a group visit, decide who will start the discussion and put your agenda on the table.

2. Listen well.

- Much of lobbying is listening, looking for indications of the elected official's views, and finding opportunities to provide good information.
- If you are meeting with a "silent type," draw her/him out by asking questions.
- If you are confronted with a "long-winded type," look for openings to bring her/him back to the point.

3. Be prepared, but don't feel that you need to be an expert.

- Most elected officials are generalists, like many of us. Do your homework, but don't feel that you need to know every little detail of an issue. Air personal feelings and experiences where appropriate. Relate the concerns of your friends and members of the community.
- Know when to admit, "I don't know," and offer to follow up with the information.
- Be open to counter-arguments, but don't get stuck on them. Don't be argumentative or confrontational.

4. Don't stay too long.

- Try to get closure on your issue. If you hear what you had hoped for, express your thanks and leave. If you reach an impasse, thank her/him, even if disappointed, and say so. Leave room to continue the discussion at another time.

5. Remember you are there to build a relationship.

- If the elected official is good on an issue you've been involved in or has supported your position in the past, be sure to acknowledge your appreciation during the course of the visit.
- If the opposite is true, think of the phrase, "No permanent friends, no permanent enemies." Some day, on some issue of importance to you, s/he may come through. In the meantime, your visit may prevent the official from being an active opponent. In other words, you may help to turn down the heat on the other side.

6. Follow-up is important.

- Be sure to send a thank-you note after the visit. If commitments were made in the meeting, repeat your understanding of them. If staff members were present, write to them too. They can often be important allies.

Three Ways To Make Your Voice Heard

People who work with nonprofit groups or in direct services have an important role to play in educating public officials about the issues and concerns they deal with. Here are three ways to get your message through.

1. Letter Writing:

Writing to a public official does make a difference. They know that every person who writes represents many others who feel the same but don't write. Follow these tips to be most effective:

- Be clear about what you want, listing the bill, etc.
- Tell a story or example to make the issue real.
- Ask for a direct response with his or her position.
- Personal letters are much better than form letters or petitions.

2. Visits

- Every citizen has the right to seek a meeting with their legislator, councilperson or other elected representative. These tips will help make visits effective:
- Keep your group small (4-5 people).
- Make your group diverse.
- Discuss in advance how to handle the meeting.
- Be direct but not threatening.
- Know your facts.
- Leave informational material with the official.
- Try to arrange the visit on your turf. Invite the person to tour a clinic or whatever facility or site which conveys your message in real and human terms.

3. Establish a relationship with staff

Many elected officials have staff people you can contact. These people are generally more accessible than the official and can usually help to get your message through.