

HOW TO LOBBY YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

Lobbying is any attempt to influence the action of any legislative body, and contrary to popular belief, anyone *can* and *should* lobby their elected officials! This guide breaks down the essential steps to take when preparing to lobby your elected officials on a policy issue that matters to you.

HOW TO PREPARE

Know Yourself

Be aware of your own personal prejudices or biases. Such knowledge will enable you to maintain objectivity by anticipating your own response in any situation.

Know Your Organization

If you are speaking on its behalf, you will want to be a credible representative. Be fully aware of your organization's positions and their development, as well as the relationship it maintains with other organizations and with the legislature.

Know Your Legislator

Make an attempt to understand the basis for your legislator's positions, which may include his or her:

- Record on related legislation and/or votes (be aware of any prior favorable commitment to your cause)
- Party, position, and tenure in legislative and political power structure
- Constituent pressures
- General predispositions

Know Your Issue

Phrase the argument in your own words. Don't be surprised if it appears you are more knowledgeable than the individual you are lobbying. No one can be expected to address every question or matter of concern regarding an issue, so don't hesitate to admit your lack of knowledge on a particular point. Be willing to pursue the answer and report back.

Know Your Opposition

It is preferable to anticipate the opposition and answer their arguments positively before those arguments surface publicly.

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Know Your Elevator Speech

In many situations, you may have a very short period to get your message across. An elevator speech is a clear, brief message or commercial about the issue. It communicates what the issue is, why it is important, and what outcome you are working on. It's typically about 30 seconds; the time it takes people to ride from the top to the bottom of a building in an elevator.

Know Your Allies

Find like-minded organizations and interest groups to join efforts with. Find ways to be helpful to the work they are already doing on the issue and to amplify their existing messages.

EFFECTIVE INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION

The Personal Visit

Perhaps the most effective method of transmitting your message, a personal visit allows both of you to connect names with faces. In communication afterward, you will have established yourself as a known, concerned constituent. If your councilmember, state legislator, or congressperson is holding a hearing or workshop, try to attend. It is a good time to meet them informally. If your representative is not available, ask to meet their staff. S/he can generally be expected to be at least as well-informed as your elected representative and may have more influence than you suspect.

Phone Calls

A phone call can be an effective tool. Remind the official of any previous contact. If the elected official is not available, speak with a legislative assistant or constituent services staff. Messages can also be left for your legislator. They should be brief and specific. Leave your name, address and phone number.

The Letter

Letters are important for elected officials and/or staff. The amount of mail on a particular piece of legislation frequently helps determine the legislator's approach to an issue. One well-written letter will often carry more weight than a formal petition with many signatures. For this reason, it is generally considered better to express your opinion as an individual rather than as a member of an organization whose positions may already be well known to legislators.

Email

Email is an efficient way to send messages. Most government websites have email addresses for elected officials. Remember, try to be as personal as possible when sending emails. And make sure to include your address and phone number.

Social Media

Speaking to your legislators through social media has the advantage of occurring in the public eye. When you comment on your legislator's Facebook or Instagram posts, other constituents can read your message, and it could also help increase awareness about the issue you are raising and build support for your cause. Through social media sites, you can ask questions, respond to legislators' posts, encourage them to act, thank them when they do something you support, and much more.

Show Up

When seeking to elevate your public profile, showing up is half the job. Attend public meetings, including legislative committee hearings, county commissioner board sessions, or town council meetings. Also consider attending rallies, special events, and town halls offered by elected officials. Make your voice heard by providing testimony at legislative hearings or by offering a public comment at a commission meeting. When offering comments, strive to be succinct, use a respectful and non-confrontational manner, and aim to address the issue at hand.

Timing

Timing is everything. Time your outreach at a strategic time, like just before a vote, or immediately following action by your legislator in support of your cause. Send a letter, an email, or make a phone call when you know a particular piece of legislation is pending before a committee or when a bill is about to come before the legislative body.

SOME *DOS* AND *DON'TS* FOR LOBBYING

DO

- Address your elected official properly (Senator Smith, Councilwoman Jones).
- Identify yourself immediately at each contact. Public officials meet too many people to remember everyone. Make sure to say, "As your constituent."
- Know the status of the legislation. Refer to a bill by number whenever possible.
- Use your own words.
- Be brief and explicit, courteous and reasonable.
- Establish your own credentials or expertise on legislation under consideration.
- Give legislators succinct, easy-to-read literature; highlight important facts and arguments. Their time is limited.
- Write to the chair or members of a committee holding hearings on legislation in which you are interested if you have facts that you think should influence his or her thinking.
- Get to know legislative staff and treat them courteously. Their cooperation can make or break your chances to reach the legislators themselves.
- Always keep off-the-record comments confidential.
- Write to say you approve, not just to criticize or oppose.
- In a letter include your address and sign your name legibly.
- Keep the door open for further discussion despite any apparently negative attitudes.

DON'T

- Don't begin, "As a citizen and taxpayer" (your elected representative knows we all pay taxes).
- Don't apologize for taking his or her time. If you are brief and to the point s/he will be glad to hear from you.
- Don't be arrogant, condescending or threatening toward legislators or their staff.
- Don't argue or back recalcitrant legislators into a corner where they take a definite position against you.
- Don't make notes of a conversation while talking to a legislator.
- Don't send copies or form letters unless you have taken the time to include a personal note.