


HOW TO LOBBY YOUR LEGISLATOR

obbying to convince any individual of the merits of your position requires an understanding of the rationale that supports that belief. Your goal is not to threaten or antagonize, but to influence on the basis of your knowledge and understanding of the issues.

Be Prepared —Before You Lobby, Do Your Homework

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 a given 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;
- responsiveness to various kinds of personal interviews (sensitivity to legislative attitudes about approach is essential).

Your appearance as an objective individual, able to deal sympathetically with the concerns of both sides, will be enhanced.

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, however 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.

Effective Individual Communication

Your maximum influence comes in addressing your comments directly to your own legislator.

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 legislator is holding a hearing or workshop, try to attend. It is a good time to meet your legislator informally.

If your representative is not available, ask to meet the legislative assistant. S/he can generally be expected to be at least as well informed as your representative, and may have more influence than you suspect.

The Telephone

The telephone can be an effective tool. Remind the legislator of any previous contact. If the member is not available, speak with the legislative assistant.

During the legislative session, you can obtain information on the status of bills by calling the Office of Legislative Services at 800-792-8630 or by visiting <http://www.njleg.state.nj.us>. 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 the legislator and/or staff. The amount of mail on a particular piece of legislation frequently helps determine the legislators' approach to an issue. One well-written letter will often prove more weighty 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.

Mailgrams are a quick, dramatic alternative to the standard letter. They may be sent anywhere and delivered the following day. The minimum charge allows for 50 words.

Faxing is a way to get your message to the committee immediately. You can also call the committee directly with your message, be sure to get their fax number at the same time.

Email is an efficient way to send messages. You can find individual email addresses under Senate or House Home Pages at <http://www.njleg.state.nj.us>.

Timing

Timing is everything. Make your call at a strategic time — just before a vote, for instance, or immediately following action by your legislator in support of your cause. Write when you know a particular piece of legislation is pending before a committee or when a bill is about to come before the full House or Senate.

Some DOs and DON'Ts for Lobbyists

DO

- ✓ Address your Senator or Representative properly.
- ✓ Identify yourself immediately at each contact. Public officials meet too many people to remember everyone.
- ✓ 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 the subject of legislation under consideration.
- ✓ Give legislators succinct, easy to read literature; highlight important facts and arguments. Their time is limited.
- ✓ Write 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 in spite of any apparently negative attitudes.

DON'T

- ✓ Don't begin, "As a citizen and tax payer" (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.

Adapted for New Jersey from the League of Women Voters of Washington handout (2004).