

HOW TO LOBBY YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

Lobbying 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.

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.

Know Your Elevator Speech

In many situations, you may have a very short period of time 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

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

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 the official's 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.

The Telephone

The telephone 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 legislators' approach to an issue. One well-written letter will often prove weightier 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.

Faxing is a way to get your message to elected officials or legislative committees immediately. You can also call the committee directly with your message, be sure to get

their fax number at the same time. Faxing, not snail mail, is the best way to reach a Washington Congressional office.

Email is an efficient way to send messages. Most government web sites have the email addresses for elected officials. Remember, try to be as personal as possible when sending email notes. Make sure to include your address and phone number.

Social Media

A recent report released by the Congressional Management Foundation highlighted that social media may be one of the best ways to get Congressional representatives' attention. More and more, it's an effective tool for reaching all elected officials. The newest and easiest method of contacting your representatives is through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Speaking to your legislators through social media has the advantage of occurring in the public eye. When you comment on your legislator's Facebook page or send a tweet, other constituents can read your message, and it could also help increase awareness about the issue you're raising and build support for your cause. Through social media sites you can ask questions, respond to legislators' posts or Tweets, encourage them to take action, thank them when they do something you support, and much more. Always be respectful and never use offensive language.

Show Up

When seeking to elevate your public profile, showing up is half the job. Attend public meetings, including legislative committee hearings, freeholder 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 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. Make your call or tweet 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 legislative body.

Some DOs and DON'Ts for Lobbyists

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 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 from the League of Women Voters of Washington handout (2004).