



Lobbying Office Holders 1: The Basics of Lobbying

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LOBBYING: THE HEART OF IT ALL

“Lobbying” public office holders, or trying to convince them to do something (or NOT), is at the very heart of citizen activism. There are many ways to lobby public office holders, referred to here as “electeds”, but this unit will focus on personal meetings. **There is no form of citizen lobbying more effective than a personal meeting.** This unit will tell you how to lobby elected officials and convince them to vote your way on important issues. Following the advice in this unit will not guarantee success, but it will make you an effective citizen lobbyist - You will succeed more than you fail.

1 SET AN APPOINTMENT AND BE ON TIME

If you simply show up at an elected’s office without an appointment, you probably won’t get one - at least not on the same day. This is especially true of legislators who have jam-packed schedules. Occasionally, you might get lucky and the elected will say, “Hi, come on in!”. But unless you already have a personal relationship with the elected, such opportunities are rare. But remember - even when you are granted an instant appointment, you may be disrupting the schedules of the elected and his or her aides (not a good way to start).

Make an advance appointment. You can almost always do this by phone. If the elected has no time available or if the earliest available time seems too far away, it may make sense to also try to make an additional appointment with the elected’s senior staff member. The key is to make your issue an active issue in the elected’s office. **When you get an appointment, BE ON TIME.** The schedules of electeds, particularly legislators, are usually packed. Still, five or ten minutes early - sometimes you will get in early and get a little extra time.

STAFF AND AIDES: THE GATEKEEPERS

Many electeds, especially at the state legislative level and above, hire staff to help them with their day-to-day work. It is VITAL that you develop a good relationship with staff and aides.

Staff members are the gatekeepers to the electeds you want to lobby. They have regular and easy access to electeds and often influence their decisions. They

control the schedules of their electeds. Because electeds often don’t have time to read every piece of legislation, they sometimes ask their aides how they should vote - and usually follow their recommendations. **If you can win over the staff, you will often win over the elected too.**

Some staff members and aides are experienced while some are very young and inexperienced. In either case, don’t underestimate their ability to help or hurt your cause. Staff and aides are used to being treated disrespectfully. They are usually underpaid. But if you treat them with respect, you will stand out from the many people who want something from them and treat them like dirt. Staff and aides will be more likely to remember you in a good light. They will be more inclined to work you into their elected’s schedule or represent your position favorably.

1 OBSERVE BASIC ETIQUETTE

When you visit an elected, always look sharp. While it is not usually necessary to dress like a business person, so-called “business casual” attire is usually appropriate. Always address the elected by their title - “Good afternoon, senator,” or “Thank you commissioner, I wasn’t aware of that.” If you are talking to a staff member, address them by their surname: “Thank you Ms. Smith, have a nice day.” As they become familiar with you, electeds and their aides will often ask that you use their first name. Even then, resist doing so unless they insist. Although they are unlikely to admit it, most electeds like to be addressed by their title.

Don’t be disruptive. If you are waiting to see an elected before an appointment, be sparing in your smalltalk. They are often very busy and, while they want to be polite to you, they need to get their work done. Their body language will tell you what to do. Don’t try to look around at their computer screen (yes, people have done this), or otherwise intrude.

Always be polite and professional, even if you are angry. NEVER lose your cool even in the unlikely event that an elected or an aide shows disrespect to you. When your appointment is over, leave gracefully. If the elected wants you to stay beyond your appointment’s scheduled end time, he or she will tell you. Always tell the truth, never exaggerate a position or misrepresent a fact.

Be prepared for your meeting. Before your appointment, be very clear with yourself about what you want to accomplish. **Be clear about the central principle you are advancing.** If you need supporting information,

have it ready and organized. Otherwise, your time and that of your elected will be wasted and it will be harder to get an appointment in the future.

Finally, thank your elected and his or her staff for their time. While electeds work for us, it is human nature for people to consider their time valuable. **If a staff member did a special favor for you, a “Thank You” note will help to ensure you will get preferential treatment in the future.**

2 TELL THEM WHO YOU ARE

When you meet with your elected, he or she will probably know your name. Introduce yourself anyway, unless you are familiar with the elected. **Tell them WHO you are that makes you worth listening to.** For example, if you are active in your PTA, your elected will know that you are active in your school and know a lot of people. The same holds true if you are a member of a civic club, organization, or service society. Telling them you are a member of Oregon Prosperity Network will let your elected know you are part of a large group. If you live in the district or zone they represent, tell them. **Remember: Electeds respond to political power and they want to know how much you have.**

3 TELL THEM WHY YOU'RE THERE

After you have told them who you are, tell them why you asked for a meeting. For example, “I have come to speak with you about House Bill 9999 which I think will make it hard for parents to put their children through college,” or, “I have come to support House Bill 9998 which will create thousands of family wage jobs in my community.” The elected will then know your name, why he/she should listen to you, and why you are there.

4 TELL THEM YOUR STORY

Consultants and professionals are great at showing graphs, charts, and focus group results. But you might be astonished to know that, in the world of politics, few things have the impact that a personal story does. Politicians respond to political power. Consultants and attorneys may be better armed with statistics and elaborate scenarios, but the personal stories of constituents who know people in their communities REPRESENT VOTES.

This is your chance to personalize the issue you are working on and make an impact on the elected or staff member you might be talking to. For example: “My father grew up in my home town manufacturing widgets. So did his father. I am a third generation widget maker. The widget industry is key in my town and is important to our identity, drives our town’s economy, and is part of our heritage. If this ordinance passes, you will shut down our industry. I will have to pull my kids out of school and move. This ordinance will kill my community and end a way of life that has endured for one hundred years. People like me will have to take

unemployment and other forms of public assistance. It is humiliating, and I know my neighbors agree.”

The objective here is to attach a human face and a human story. **By bringing emotional and intellectual impact to your position, you bring political power to your position. As you prepare your personal story, think about the central principle involved and articulate this principle clearly when you testify.** Such principles could be “freedom”, “choice”, “facilitating prosperity”...this will vary depending on your issue. But always be clear about the principle at the heart of your story, with those you are speaking to and with yourself.

5 TELL THEM WHAT YOU WANT

Finally, and perhaps most important, TELL YOUR ELECTED PRECISELY WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO DO. As you conclude, always say something like, “These are the reasons I urge you to vote for Ordinance 32-3 and help preserve jobs in my community,” or “So for these reasons, I strongly urge you to vote AGAINST Senate Bill 8888 and protect charter schools throughout Oregon”. Bottom line, tell them what you want them to do.

You are a salesperson when you lobby an elected. Ask for their commitment. You might get it, you might not - but you will get an idea about where you stand. Your product is your position on an issue, and you are trying to convince the elected you are talking to, or his/her staff, to adopt your position instead of someone else’s. Always ask for the sale.

LOBBYING: OTHER WAYS TO LOBBY

There are other ways to lobby your legislature. Emails work, but they are often discarded unless the recipient knows you or your email is one of many received on a topic. Faxes are better than emails. Phone calls are better than faxes. **Personal meetings are the best. When possible, DO EVERYTHING and ask your friends to do the same.**

In the long run, no matter how you lobby, following this formula will lead you to success.