



Guide to Lobbying Your Legislators

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Introduction



So you know what you want to say but you're just not sure how and when to say it. Ok, maybe you're not even sure what you want to say, you just know how you feel. Well, join the vast majority of average citizens and the legislative process. Talking to your legislators and getting your point across is surprisingly easy once you get a few rules down, hence the " NREDA Guide to Lobbying Your Legislators". Once you understand a few basic rules you'll find the process surprisingly easy and even fun.

So let's take it step by step ...

Know the Staff and Your Legislators

Take some time to visit their website then call or e-mail and get the names of:

- Chief of Staff/Administrative Assistant
- Legislative Director
- Press Secretary
- Appointment Secretary or Scheduler

These people can prove to be important in not only gaining access to your elected official, but in informing, advising and promoting your position. We suggest calling or e-mailing because conventional mail gets stalled due to security reasons. It can literally take days or weeks for a letter to reach anyone's desk.

Prioritize Issues

If it applies, prioritize by regional impact starting from the issue that has the most benefit for the largest area.

Address one issue at a time.

Have no more than three issues.

Research your issues.



Cruise the internet and your legislator's websites - there's a lot of information to be found. Find your issue and familiarize yourself with the legislator's position or activity. Nothing there? Feel free to call and ask.

Develop Your Message.

Get out a piece of paper and a pencil - we're going old school here. Jot a few notes down. Are you in favor of something? Figure out why. Against? Same deal. Need something? Tell them why it's good for their constituency and therefore good for them. Can you site sources, people, and/or agencies that support your position? Don't be afraid of doing a little name dropping.

Site impacts, either positive or negative. Express concerns, but be diplomatic.

- Have one main message with up to three underlying themes to support it.
- All messages should support your main goals.
- Messages don't change frequently. For messages to have impact they have to be repeated over and over again.
- Consistent messages should permeate all of your common communication efforts, not just contact with the media or congress.
- Keep it simple: You should be able to state your message in a sentence or two. If it requires a paragraph or two, keep working.

Deliver the Message

If you have time it might be a good idea to start out with an e-mail to effectively “ring the bell”. If not, use this same basic format for your meeting with the legislator.

1. Check to see if they like to receive e-mails and the address they prefer you use. Sometimes certain email addresses are checked by the secretary and the legislator may never see it.

2. Use a formal address and salutation.

“Dear Congressman So-And-So” or if you are lobbying your state legislator it would be “ Dear Senator or Representative”.

3. Identify yourself and be sure to include your address as they need to know you are a constituent. Example:

“Hello, my name is _____ and I am writing to you on behalf of Franklin Rural Electric Cooperative from the Hampton office in Franklin County, Iowa.”

4. Who doesn't like compliments? It's the right thing to do, so whenever possible, include a compliment then get to the point right away:



“We have long admired your hard work on behalf of rural economic development. We thank you for your unfailing commitment to making _____ a better place, which is why we approach you now. We are asking for your support of legislation to _____”

“We believe this legislation is a great idea because it will provide the funding needed to support our plan to attract new investment into your part of the state. ”

5. If they have an opposing point of view, invite them to reconsider and offer your rationale why:

"We recognize you have a different view; however we ask you to reconsider because our plan will benefit a greater number of your constituents by being spread over a wider number of communities"

6. Close and ask for action or a meeting.

Set Up a Meeting.

4-5 weeks ahead of time put in a request for a meeting. You can call or e-mail. Address your request to their scheduler and be sure to include your full name, your address (once again so they know you are a constituent), the reason for the visit and a mention that the meeting will get local press coverage. Politicians love positive press. Let them know when you would like to visit, how many in there will be in your party and the scheduler will get back to you.

A note about size of your party: Keep it under 7 - any more can feel like a mob.

You Got the Meeting? Great! Now What?



Remember the time you spent developing your message? Here's where it pays off. Make sure you have the major points, plus contact information, in writing to present to the staff. They'll need to refer to it later. Have it neatly typewritten on company letterhead and if relevant, include photos, charts or supporting documentation.

1. Three weeks before your meeting call to confirm. It's not unusual for meeting requests to get lost so you want to make sure. Don't be surprised if you have to re-submit your request.

2. One week before your meeting call and confirm. Yes, again. Things happen, schedules change and you just never know what might happen.

3. Be prepared. Decide who will be spokesperson and what points will be addressed. Dress neatly and be on time and don't forget your handouts. Bring your camera.

4. Stay flexible. Last minute changes are a common occurrence and often can't be avoided.

5. Be polite and courteous, but of course you already know that.

6. You are in the meeting now so remember your manners and introduce everyone in your party. Be sure to collect the names and contact info of everyone from the legislator's side as well.

Let's say you get there and you've been handed off to an aide. Don't feel offended or discouraged and never underestimate the power of a well informed staffer. Develop a relationship with them. Express your appreciation for their hard work. Staffers can be surprisingly effective in advocating on your behalf and can often get your request further up the food chain.

7. You've rehearsed your presentation so now's the time to make your pitch, just avoid mixing personal political views with your corporate objectives. Stay focused and stick to the issues you came to address. Expect that you may get interrupted by questions as you go along.

8. Take notes. It's perfectly alright and demonstrates you are serious. It also holds them slightly more accountable for any commitments or promises to act.

9. This is important: Make a specific request that requires action or response such as voting for or against a bill. Don't be afraid of asking questions that will require them to get back to you as this keeps you on their radar. If there's a timeline involved, let them know.

10. Before leaving remember to ask for a photo for that great article that will show up in the local newspaper.

11. Whatever you do:

- Don't talk badly about the other side.
- Don't talk badly about other legislators.
- Don't discuss your legislator's campaign for office with staffers - it's against the law.
- Never *ever* suggest contributions or votes tied to favorable action on your behalf.

12. Consider carrying breath mints with you to use before your meeting starts. It gives you a clear throat. It's also a good way to open up a conversation by offering one to the others, if need be.

Meeting is Over, What's Next?

- Debrief yourselves right away, tracking everyone's impressions and thoughts.
- Delegate any further actions or activities.
- Appoint someone to write a thank you note which will reiterate the issue and any actions.

Wait a couple of weeks then contact them again to refresh their memory. Ask what you can do to help, then back off and let the process work, checking in about once a month.

Congratulations you did it!



Additional Resources:

NRECA's website has a great tool kit with links to sources, forms and bill lookups:

www.nreca.org/TakeAction/Tools.htm

The National Telecommunications Cooperative Association has great information on it's web-site at www.ntca.org.

We can't forget the Library of Congress, a tremendous repository of information on all things government www.loc.gov

Links to a slew of great government sites on our own NREDA website under related links www.nreda.org



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