

Lobbying 101

By Jim Nowlan

With few exceptions, elected lawmakers such as state legislators and members of Congress want dearly to be re-elected, to the point they are interested—really, I mean it—in hearing what you have to say. They are even more so at present because they don't know what their districts will look like until after decennial redistricting occurs in May, a process that may leave the lawmakers with substantially new districts and the uncertainty of re-election.

So I thought I'd give you a brief lesson in citizen lobbying, so you can enhance the impact you have upon your elected officials.

There are differing levels of communication with the officials, from somewhat impersonal emails and letters to face-to-face contact, and much depends upon the level of interaction you have time and interest in conducting.

In these days of Google and the Internet, it is certainly easy to find and communicate with your officials.

The key overall to lobbying is to get the right message to the right person in the right format at the right time. This is what the thousands of professional lobbyists in state capitols and Washington hone to a fine art.

The first lesson is to be as personal as possible. Face to face is best, and easy to arrange, with personal mailed letters much better than form letters and emails.

Second, be brief. Assume that the lawmaker will have hundreds of messages to absorb each week, so he or she and the staff, when there is staff (primarily at the congressional level), will have limited time to focus on your message.

Third, in your brevity, present a couple, maybe three, crisp reasons to be for or against the legislation of interest to you. These reasons often inform a lawmaker on each of the hundreds of pieces of legislation he will have to make decisions on.

When I was a state legislator decades ago, my seatmate slid personal letters on legislation into his book of bills on his desk on the chamber floor, adjacent to the bill in question. When that bill came up, my seatmate read the letters again as the debate took place. Often there was only one or a few letters, sometimes none, on a particular bill. Talk about influence that a letter could have!

If you feel strongly enough that you want to pay a personal call on your legislator, simply Google the lawmaker, call his district office, and set up an appointment to see him or her.

Recently I went to Springfield for University of Illinois Lobby Day to fly the pennant for my alma mater. The 100-plus of us gathered for lunch, where we heard the messages we were asked to communicate. We were assigned in small groups to call upon our respective House and Senate members in their offices or just off their legislative chambers. We were met graciously by the lawmakers, given time to communicate our points in behalf of stronger support for the ol' U, and that was it.

If your legislative interest is one that will be around for awhile, and not decided in this spring's session, meeting with your lawmakers at their district offices when they are not pressed by the hurly burly of the session is preferable for both you and the legislator.

You can often coordinate your communications to lawmakers with your interest group(s) and its professional lobbyists. Just about everyone belongs to one or more interest groups—veterans, wine grape growers, taxpayers, artists, you name it. Even

religions have lobbyists. The Catholic Council of Illinois and Protestants for the Common Good are examples. If you don't know of interest groups that share your passions, try Googling to see what groups represent your interests.

The professional lobbyists benefit from the communications you make in behalf of your mutual interests. Interest group strength is calibrated by five elements—numbers, credibility, visibility, intensity, and money. Every interest has some of each of these with the exception of money, as some groups don't contribute to campaigns. Doctors may have relatively small numbers but they have lots of credibility and money; gun owners and bikers have deep intensity of feeling that impresses lawmakers.

Your primary job as a citizen lobbyist is to communicate your message effectively to the lawmakers. The professional lobbyists go further to craft different messages for different audiences. For example, legislative committee staffs want extensive, detailed messages of support or opposition while lawmakers want briefer communications, because the staff are expected to become the experts on the legislation.

In sum, information is critical to lawmakers and you may have information, certainly you have opinions and feelings, that they indeed want to hear, especially at times such as these when the lawmakers are looking ahead to new districts where every vote may count. If you have questions about lobbying, please feel free to email me at nowlan@illinois.edu.