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A Top Ten Insider's Guide to Effective Advocacy

As an experienced advocate, I'm frequently asked for "how-to" tips on effective strategies for legislative and congressional advocacy by folks who are not at the Capitol every day. Since effective advocacy is a 12-month job, the following fits into the category of a year-round homework assignment.

I trust you understand the value of speaking up on public policy matters which concern and interest you. Responsible advocacy is the heartbeat of a representative democracy. Remember....the root of advocacy is "voca"....the voice! I welcome your feedback and hope you will share this with your volunteer and professional colleagues.

1. Don't be a stranger to your elected officials and their staff members. The most persuasive messages come from familiar faces. Know them by name, and make sure they know you by name. Anonymity is the antithesis of effectiveness. Invite officials to your community partnership programs for conversations and photos. When it comes to creating a positive impression....Seeing is Believing.
2. Introduce yourself at every opportunity. Always have business cards with you and hand them out like candy at Halloween -- always have extras. Ask for cards from others and send them an acknowledgement note or e-mail within a day or two of the meeting.
3. Always say "thank you" before you say "please." Even if you disagree with your elected official's positions on some (or even most) issues, they are more likely to listen to you if you've found some way to praise them. If nothing else, thank them for the courage to be a public office holder.
4. A well-written, brief thank you note is always appreciated. Remember, officials get 25 complaints for every compliment. Like the wise hotel maitre 'd once taught me in my dining room waitering days, "Only two types of people respond well to an honest compliment -- males and females."
5. The hometown connection is essential to help elected officials listen with both ears. Concentrate on principles of policy, rather than too many specifics which may change by the hour. Trust that your "every day professional advocates" know the details; your job is to set the stage with your elected officials and to pave the way for your allied advocates at the Capitol. There's a real difference between lobbying and advocacy. Lobbyists make it hard for elected officials to say "No." Advocates make it easy for them to say "Yes." Advocates do not need to be partisan, do not require a PAC, and never resort to threats or retribution to be effective.

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6. Always be concise and to the point. The issue or program you advocate should be compressed into a paragraph and a two-minute presentation. The key to influence is not volume, but precision. Elected officials are not experts, but don't want to be overwhelmed with your knowledge. Have them trust you as someone to turn to for more details if they are needed. Sharpen your point and it will make an impact.

7. Engage the media (or schmooze the newsies!!) who have the power to send your message far and wide. An expert source and passionate volunteer are golden to every reporter and editorial/opinion writer -- but, be careful: they should not perceive you as seeking "publicity." Once you're viewed as an accessible expert when they're on deadline, you can pitch them ideas anytime. The media is an advocate's most cost-effective megaphone.

8. Write Letters to the Editor. Submit guest op-ed columns, and encourage allies to do the same. The opinion pages are read word-for-word by every public official. It's where powerful people test the pulse of the thinking community. You have their attention if your case is made in print. Never attack, always attract. Be positive and persuasive, giving your readers a reason to care and act on your behalf.

9. Advocacy requires the art of compromise....never expect it all. While we strive for unanimity, we work for majority. There's a difference between compromising principles (a no-no) and a healthy policy discussion. Long-term relationships require understanding where everyone is coming from before you know where you're going. Burned bridges are impossible to cross, and antagonistic scars may never heal.

10. While there's strength in diversity, there's power in unity. Bring as many diverse voices to your cause as possible, but reach a unifying message. Agree on the important unifying goals and success will be achieved.

"Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

- Anthropologist Margaret Mead

For additional information on advocacy strategies contact:

Jack Levine
jack@4Gen.org
850/567-5252