

# How a Lobbyist Works

*By Robert L'Ecuyer, Attorney at Law*

A lobbyist who's a friend of mine recently complained that her association's members do not know how much work goes into her job. No doubt she's right. Association members often attend meetings and receptions with legislators. After a little performance anxiety over meeting folks with power or influence, they go home thinking "that was easy." They usually don't know all the behind-the-scenes preparation that went into the meeting. That preparation is the secret of success.

First, lobbyists must know exactly what it is the association wants from legislators. That means research. Lobbyists must know all about any proposed legislation, document the data, massage it into something that informs and hopefully adds some insight. The members have to understand the legislation so the lobbyist can learn exactly how the bill affects the various members of the association. The legislator also has to understand the legislation and how it affects the constituents. So, lobbyists must be educators. They must also be ready to diffuse any dissident members who may communicate directly with the legislator.

Lobbyists must know the state's public policy and how a particular piece of legislation does or doesn't fit that agenda. Does a state agency, the governor's office or the legislative leadership have a strong position on the proposal? The lobbyist must know. They don't want to schedule a meeting with an elected official and have enthusiastic members stunned when they are told that the governor or legislator thinks their bill is bad public policy. What are the arguments against the association's position? Assume that the other side can reach the key legislator. The lobbyist has to be able to counter the opponent's best argument.

Who are the association's allies? The lobbyist must consult with as many people as possible, inform them and enlist them. Legislators may have already called people the association has claimed as allies. In a meeting, imagine what happens to the association member's credibility if the member claims support from a supposed ally the legislator knows is uncommitted.

Lobbyists need to use their contacts with legislators to learn what will realistically be accomplished with the legislation. It's critical that the lobbyist prepare the volunteers to ask for something that will receive a positive response from the legislator.

The next step is to develop the strategy and decide the best methods for carrying it out. Should this legislator meet with "big clout" association members or is grassroots intervention best?

The lobbyist must make sure the targeted legislator is powerful enough to accomplish the objective. It's easy to get in to see a newly elected legislator, but it's rare when that person can influence a bill or introduce association members to the key leader or chair.

The lobbyist and association members must be optimistic about their task. They must be convinced that the system really wants to help them if it is at all possible, which is almost always true. Legislators get few votes by telling people "no."

The lobbyist needs to lay the groundwork before the association meets with a legislator. Legislators do not like surprises. That means the lobbyist may need to do a dress rehearsal to ensure that the legislator can appear knowledgeable and sympathetic in their meeting with the association.

The lobbyist must also prepare the troops. The association's members must be instructed to be brief and concise. A meeting with a legislator is not a long social event. The best way to make a point at a reception will be for several members to make the pitch in short private encounters rather than to gang up on the targeted legislator.

At the meeting, each person should be introduced. A lobbyist will often provide the background on each person in attendance. The background helps give credibility and the legislator may then listen more carefully.

The lobbyist wants the legislator to know the people and the issues as thoroughly as possible. This makes the legislator look in control and impresses those with whom the legislator is meeting. Failure to prepare the participants can lead to mistakes that could have been avoided through preparation.

Association members and lobbyists have different types of credibility with legislators. If the strategy is to use members for their impact, the meeting is not the time for the lobbyist to show off. The members should present the position. However, the lobbyist may need to act as a stage manager. One of the most important qualities in a lobbyist is to know when to speak and when to be quiet.

Association members must learn to ask the lobbyist for insights on what to expect in the meeting. Legislators are known to say things like "That's a really good idea," that lead the volunteers to think they have received a commitment. Wrong! A commitment is a specific promise to take a certain action. However, there are times when the legislator hasn't yet talked to the other side. In that case, the lobbyist must prepare members to know when to leave without an answer and not be disappointed.

A summary of the meeting should be prepared by the lobbyist. The summary should be one page or less per issue with separate issues on separate pages so the summary pages can be put into the legislator's individual bill files.

Under no circumstances should the lobbyist allow members to threaten a legislator. That can make an enemy. There's always going to be another issue and the association may need the legislator as an ally for that one.

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