

Working with Decision-Makers

ADVANCED LOBBYING: HOW TO INFLUENCE DECISION-MAKERS

The key to influencing decision-makers is to understand their motivations. Decision-makers are people who set policies and/or determine how public funds are spent. By building relationships with decision-makers and learning what they want and care about, you will know what actions your Chapter needs to take in order to influence them to join you in making positive change for children.

While every situation is different and requires rigorous, strategic thinking, this lesson outline some basic components you should understand to effectively influence decision-makers. This section includes: 1) understanding the decision-making body, 2) assessing a decisionmaker's self-interest, 3) building support for your issue, and 4) applying strategic pressure.

1. Often, a decision is made by a group of decision-makers. Having an understanding of the dynamic of the entire decision-making body and the decision-makers that are a part of it is crucial to winning.
 - The first step is figuring out how many votes you need to win. (It's usually a majority but sometimes, if you're trying to raise revenue, it's 3/5).
 - Second, learn the specifics of the process (e.g., the steps in budget-making, when certain committees are involved, and when and how the decision actually gets made).
 - Finally, gather information about the key decision-makers. All decision-makers are not created equal. Some have formal authority – the power to determine budgets, hold hearings, kill proposals, etc. Some have informal authority – the force of personality, greater knowledge, strong relationships with other decision-makers who tend to vote with them, longstanding experience. You have to know about both to win.

2. Assessing a Decision-maker's Self-interest

Once you understand the decision-making body, you will have a sense of which decision-makers to target for meetings. Then, you must determine what the self-interest of the decision-makers you are targeting. Self-interest is a fundamental driver of elected officials' decisions. While decision-makers' personal views on an issue are certainly relevant, time and time again they vote in ways that are at odds with these views. Why? Because of self-interest.

The best way to assess a decision-maker's self-interest is through building a relationship. However, some research can be done before meeting with decision-makers that will give you an edge when piecing together how you plan on strategically pressuring them to support your position.

One critical piece of information is what type of decision-maker you are working with: an elected or an appointed official.

Once you have established which decision-makers have the power to create the change you are seeking, you can begin to determine more about their self-interest. Obviously, self-interest varies depending on the person, but here are some common ones:

1. Re-election.

Getting re-elected is the most core and common self-interest among elected officials. Very few politicians just stand up for what they believe, come what may. Most care about getting re-elected, either for ego reasons (they like the status or the power), financial reasons (they need the job), or

because serving longer will enable them to increase their influence (through committee chairpersonships, leadership positions, etc.).

The more closely contested a politician's campaign was in previous elections, the more re-election affects each and every decision. To effectively persuade a decision-maker, it is important to find out:

- (If relevant.) What the party registration and party performance (i.e., which party turns out to vote more) is in their district.
- How much they won by last time and, if applicable, the time before.
- Which groups and individuals were vital in their last victory.
- When are they up for re-election.
- What, if any, key considerations are there with the next election (e.g., higher turnout, lower turnout, certain type of turnout based on other factors, etc).

Knowing this information will help you see how much pressure or encouragement might matter to a politician and who else you might enlist (e.g., key campaign backers) to put pressure on them.

Desire for re-election drives politicians' behavior:

- It causes them to be interested in publicity and "credit." Making them look good to the general public is helpful. Making them look bad is damaging.
- It makes them predisposed to do the bidding of the strong membership groups and wealthy individual and organizational campaign donors that helped them get elected. For this reason, it's important to find out who a politician "owes."
- (In Legislatures.) It causes them to tend to vote with their party's leadership, especially when their party's leadership punishes those who go against them by:
 - Stripping them of committee chairmanships or attractive committee assignments.
 - Killing their bills so they can't accomplish what they want and have no record to run on.
 - Recruiting and backing an opponent in the next primary election.

2. Running for a Higher Office

Many politicians aspire to higher office. It's important to know if a particular politician has such ambition and to understand how they might see a group. It's also important to understand how the desire for higher office might get in the way of the official taking principled stands on important issues.

3. Making a Difference on Issues of Importance to Them or Their Communities

Often, a person runs for office on the basis of a few issues they really care about. On those deeply felt issues they're less inclined to compromise and they are often willing to trade support for an issue they are neutral on or even disagree with in order to get support for their "pet" issue. This is



known as “log rolling.” In addition to their “pet” issues, politicians need to show they are effective on the major issues affecting their constituents.

Either way, they are motivated to get results, they might be inclined to help on an issue that is a priority for us.

4. Helping Maintain or Win a Legislative Majority for their Party

Understanding the political strategy of a party caucus (group of Legislators from one party) will help you assess the prospects for your issue and also how you might present it to them.

5. Personality and Personal Backgrounds Also Matter

Knowing an elected officials’ professional background and story can help you craft more persuasive arguments. In addition, knowing people whom an elected officials respects and listens to can be an important way to persuade them to our side or at least get access to them.

Personality also matters. Politicians are referred to as “leaders.” But they are often unwilling to stand up for what they believe in, because they want approval and dislike disapproval even more than the average person. While officials with this tendency may not readily show it – in fact, they’ll often come off as haughty or dismissive or be prone to bursts of anger when confronted – it’s common. For many politicians, electoral defeat understandably amounts to painful rejection, and



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they will do anything to avoid it. This tends to matter only for elected officials who are from swing-able districts.

Once you have a solid understanding of who the decision-makers are, and how the decision will be made, you can start building support for your solution. Here's how:

Develop the Strongest Possible Case for Your Solution

- Be specific about what you want (including specific investment level, if applicable) and translate the ask into exact benefits for children.
- Make a range of arguments (moral, economic, common sense) that will persuade decision-makers.
- Anticipate counter arguments and have responses ready.
- (If possible.) Conduct a poll to find out how the public (ideally likely voters) feels on your issue. If your issue has overwhelming or at least solid majority support, it will help you persuade decision-makers to support it.

Move Decision-Makers Up the Support Spectrum

Through our conversations with decision-makers, we can determine where they stand on our issues, and how supportive they are of our work – then we can place them on the following support spectrum:

- Champion
- Active Supporter
- Passive Supporter
- Undecided
- Passive Opponent
- Active Opponent
- Leadership of Opposition

Our focus should be on everyone from undecided through champions. See the following grid to 1) assess the decision-maker's current level of support, 2) present a compelling and personalized message to move them up the support spectrum, and 3) ask for concrete next steps to have the decision-maker demonstrate their support.

Examples of next steps to demonstrate support?

- Press conference
- Op-Ed in the newspaper
- Television interview (cable access or other)
- Email blast or mailing to personal network
- Provide quote of support for our materials
- Facilitate person introductions to additional legislators
- Low visibility
- Talk to leadership of decision-making body
- Talk to other decision-makers
- Facilitate connections with other allied organizations
- Dedicate staff resources

WHY LOBBYISTS NEED SOCIAL MEDIA John Hall is CEO of www.digitaltalentagents.com

I recently had a sit-down with a lobbyist to discuss the potential to increase his company brand through strategic publishing opportunities. When I was explaining how being published online can create a pull strategy to his company's website and social media accounts, his response was something like, "Why should I do the whole social media thing?" I replied with an astounded "What?!" I have dealt with a lot of lobbyists who are extremely bright, and some who are ridiculously dumb. Some are lobbyists for the right reasons, and there are others who are immoral to the core.

In the first ten minutes, I could see that this was a guy who was in it for the right reasons and was intelligent. So why would he shy away from one of the best resources available to mankind? He explained that he has seen some lobbyists or politicians cause more harm than good when they have embraced social media outlets. (Keeping half-naked pictures of yourself in your phone is a bad idea, regardless of whether you use social media, but I digress.) This idea has clouded his vision and prevented him from seeing the true benefits that social media can offer. We didn't have much time to talk, but I responded with the following points:

1. Think before you tweet.

If you are worried about how people are going to perceive you as a professional while you are tweeting at the Snoop Dogg concert, then don't do it. I don't have any issues with Snoop Dogg and I even like a song or two, but I may pause before tweeting "Bow wow wow" with a beer in my hand at a concert.

You can use Twitter to receive recent news updates, spread a quality message, learn from industry experts, engage with interesting people, and reach a large audience of followers in seconds.

2. Really...no, really...you aren't on LinkedIn?

Out of all the social media outlets, I thought, at a minimum, he was on LinkedIn. It's about as professional as you can get with social media, so you almost have to *try* to get in trouble. (Writing a bad recommendation for "that guy" at the Christmas party would probably do it. If you don't know who "he" is, it's probably you) Before I meet or take a call with anyone, I usually check them out on LinkedIn. In one view, I can see who they are connected to and verify that they are the real deal. I'm able to capitalize on similar interests during conversations so that things go smoothly. I can even get intros to people who would be great business partners, just by seeing a close friend has a connection to them.

LinkedIn is a great resource to prepare for meetings, connect to people via friendly intros, and even gain some solid clients.

3. The only outfit I could understand his apprehension with is Facebook, but it still has benefits.

With people having the ability to share photos of you on Facebook with limited control on your part, issues can arise. You can continuously untag them, but all it takes is one person to get it downloaded and shared. (And let's be honest, you don't want anyone seeing your 1999 spring break photos.) You also have that uncomfortable denial for friendship when a client or colleague tries to friend you. I know it sounds crazy, but I shook hands with a guy the other day and he immediately



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sent a friend request from his phone as he was walking away. Facebook can be a great platform to share your message, and a company page can certainly attract business. Possibly the most beneficial part of Facebook for business is the ability to advertise on Facebook. You can target ads to extremely targeted demographics and track your analytics. Facebook can be a good resource, but keep an eye on it and control your preferences so that you aren't having unwanted events occurring on your page.