

For Effective Grassroots Action

Grassroots lobbying is all about communication at the local level. Every federal and state legislator has to stand for election – locally. When concerned local business people and professionals express opinions both local and national politicians listen and appreciate the expertise you offer. The key is keeping your communication short, clear and to-the-point so it is easily and quickly understood.

The Five “W’s” of a Grassroots Program

Who? – YOU. No one knows the issues, needs and goals of your business or profession the way you do.

What? – Work with your state associations to help educate Members of Congress, State Legislators and key staffers about legislative and regulatory proposals that may impact you.

Where? – At the federal or state level.

When? – Over the long term, relationships must be established, expanded and maintained with legislators. You must be ready to act quickly because issues often arise that require rapid response.

Why? – Businesses and professions are very vulnerable to the impact of legislation and regulation.

1.) Access

Nothing is more important than access to legislators and their key staff. Once you have access you will communicate with members of the U.S. Congress and state legislatures in order to influence governmental policy that affects your business and profession. The goal is to establish, develop and sustain a strong link between the Government Affairs staff, your profession, your local organizations and YOU, the grassroots voice.

2.) Communication

- Effective communication is essential to any grassroots campaign. The following points describe effective communication.
- Letters
- Simple, concise and to the point.
- Answer more questions than you raise.
- Always address Who? What? Where? When? And Why?
- Always work to build consensus.
- Personal visits always establish the strongest, most lasting bond.

There are several means of communicating with elected officials.

- Emails
- Visits with elected officials or with their staff.
- Telephone calls.
- Fax.
- Inviting your member of Congress to tour your business.
- Work with your Government Affairs Team if you have one.

3.) Grassroots Organizing

Maximize the effectiveness of grassroots lobbying by making it broad-based and ensuring that the issues have a “local face.” Build your grassroots organization with people you know. Your employees, friends and concerned groups like senior citizen organizations. Build coalitions made up of other business people and professionals, advocacy groups, other local small business leaders, your employees and family members.

4.) Understanding Legislators

Understanding the nature of your primary audience and the factors that influence and motivate them in their actions is extremely important.

- Many factors influence decision making by legislators.
- The daily work of congress and state legislatures happens in their committees.
- Most legislators’ activities are budget-driven.
- Most Members of Congress and state legislators are constantly campaigning for re-election.

A legislator’s typical day is broken into thirty-minute intervals (except for committee meetings, which last for hours) during which they:

- Shuttle between committee sessions
- Rush to the House or Senate floor to vote or speak on a bill
- Work and negotiate with other members
- Meet with their staff or committee staff
- Meet with constituent groups – from Boy Scouts to the American Legion
- Meet with business, financial, labor leaders and others
- Take briefings from administration and federal agency officials
- Attend morning and evening fund raisers and receptions
- Meet after office hours with staff and lobbyists
- Travel home to their districts on most weekends
- Spend weekends meeting with district office staff and constituents and attending local functions.... In time to fly back to Washington and start all over again

Getting a word in edgewise can be difficult. That is why your communication must be precise and to-the-point. Remember to communicate with staff members. Legislative Assistants generally analyze issues and advise the legislator of local feeling about the issue before any vote. Every vote is a balancing act. All politicians will go to great lengths to avoid controversy on a vote that will come back to haunt them at election time.

5.) Congress – Where the Action Is

Appreciate that power in Congress is centralized because of its leadership committee structure, and understand that power in Congress is also diffused over many members and their staffs outside the leadership structure.

- The majority rules in Congress as in no other institution. Personal views have a bearing, and local concerns sometimes take precedence over the party line – a fact not lost on a well-informed grassroots activist!
- Just knowing the political process and understanding all the considerations that can affect how a legislator votes makes you a player in the game.
- Committee staff are the gatekeepers.
- Never ignore either committee or personal staff. They are usually specialists, allowing their bosses to be generalists.

6.) Building Relationships

The most successful lobbying is based upon long-term relationships. Grassroots lobbyists need to be educators, facilitators, coalition builders and policy advocates. Heavy-handed tactics never work. Information is the primary tool of the trade. Be sure you understand the issue before you try to educate your legislator about it.

7.) Money

Understand the very delicate role and significance of campaign financing.

- The majority of political funding comes from the contributions millions of Americans make to PAC's.
- Elected officials know their financial base lies in their home district.
- There is one other thing you can do besides making campaign contributions – volunteer! Giving some of your personal time to a candidate can pay big dividends later when it comes to grassroots lobbying.

A. Writing to Legislators

When writing to your Senator(s) or Representative(s) use their full names preceded by the salutation: The Honorable _____:

- State your concern – mention specific legislation when appropriate.
- Back up your view with facts.
- Offer to provide more information as a local business owner or professional.

B. Guide to tours for Elected Officials

Start by getting to know your legislators. The basic steps and protocol for getting a meeting with a legislator are listed below:

- Call the legislator's office to schedule your meeting.
- Know the issues you want to discuss.
- Call again closer to the date of the meeting and reconfirm the appointment.
- Be on time.
- Be friendly, polite and brief.
- Leave a one-page summary of the issues discussed
- Always ask the legislator to take a specific action.
- If the legislator asks you a question to which you don't know the answer, advise the legislator that you will follow up on the issue and get back to him or her.
- Don't feel "put off" if you meet with the legislator's staff.

- Invite the legislator to visit your business or professional building.
- Be sure that when you leave, your legislator knows that you are an informed professional resource should he or she need information and insights about your business or profession.
- Always send a “thank you” note.

Plan your tour. Election seasons provide an ideal time for a site visit.

C. Grassroots “How-To” Kit

Government at federal, state and local levels can affect your business or profession dramatically. Taxes and regulations can impose heavy burdens on the ability to operate.

- Put a local face on national issues.
- Community Involvement is the first step.
- Elected officials need to know what you know. Educate them in the operations of your business or profession.
- “All politics is local.” So said House speaker Tip O’Neill, one of the most notable politicians of the past century. Relationships with local decision-makers are critical to the operation of your business.
- Learn the legislative process.
- Aim for prime time. The prime time to present an issue is after one or more legislators introduce a bill.
- Write letters-to-the-editor.
- Organize a town hall meeting.

It is in your interest to take a local leadership role. There are issues that the public needs to know about... and elected officials need to hear from as many quarters as possible. When you step forward to speak up, you help your business or profession. Remember, an individual in our democracy can make a difference by helping to MAKE IT HAPPEN. That’s grassroots action!

