

How to Lobby a Decision-maker

I. Background

The activity of meeting with a decision-maker is called "lobbying" because in the late 1800s people who wanted to meet with the U.S. president of the time waited to meet with him in the lobby of the hotel in which he lived.

Lobbying has grown in the U.S. and Canada into an industry that employs hundreds of people paid hundreds of millions of dollars, and lobbying governments is now often regulated by laws that set out disclosure and ethics rules. Many lobbyists are former decision-makers (Cabinet ministers, assistants to ministers etc.) who now sell their inside knowledge of how government works and ability to get access to decision-makers to other people, corporations or organizations that are trying to influence government decision-makers.

There are also decision-makers in corporations who are regularly lobbied. For example, lobbyists are hired by corporations to lobby the decision-makers at other corporations, mainly to try to win sales contracts, and corporations also lobby other corporations on their own.

Citizens and citizen groups also lobby decision-makers, both government decision-makers and corporate decision-makers. However, because many citizens and citizen groups lack the money needed to hire a lobbyist, they usually lobby on their own.

II. Why Lobby Decision-makers?

Lobbying decision-makers helps you do the following things:

- get to know them;
- find out what decision-making power they have;
- educate them about your issue/problems;
- educate them about your proposed solution(s);
- find out whether your solution is something they are considering;
- find out what solutions they are considering, if any;
- find out what may change their mind, if they disagree with you;
- find out whether they have a timeline/deadline for addressing your issue/problem;
- learn about other decision-makers they are working with; and
- build their commitment to do something about your issue/problem.

III. How to Lobby a Decision-maker

(a) Characteristics of Effective Lobbying

When citizens or citizen groups meet to lobby a decision-maker, the meeting should be viewed as an accountability session with the following characteristics:

- it involves getting to know the decision-maker;
- it involves finding out what decision-making power s/he has;
- it educates him/her about your issue/problems;
- it educates him/her about your proposed solution(s);
- it determines whether your solution is something s/he is considering;
- it determines what solutions s/he is considering, if any;
- it determines what may change their mind, if s/he disagrees with you;
- it determines whether s/he has a timeline/deadline for addressing your issue/problem; and
- it involves learning about other decision-makers s/he is working with;
- it ends with a commitment from you and him/her to follow-up on specific tasks/questions by a specific date

(b) How to Plan a Lobbying Meeting

The following are key steps in planning a lobbying meeting:

- find out which organizations, government and/or corporate, can give you what you want;
- find out who the key decision-makers are at each organization you are trying to influence;
- find out who and what influences each key decision-maker;
- find out the priorities of each key decision-maker;
- find out what each decision-maker has done in the past on the issue/problem, so you can congratulate him/her for good past work, if applicable;
- find out the details about any decision-making process that is underway or is upcoming that relates to your issue/problem;
- find out who has met with each key decision-maker on the same issue/problem;
- find out what other people or organizations have said to each key decision-maker about the same issue/problem;
- prepare brief responses to everything other people or organizations have said to each key decision-maker about the issue/problem;
- prepare brief, specific summaries of what you want (3-5 pages), your solution(s) to the issue/problem, all the costs and benefits of your solution(s), along with material that shows there is broad support for your solution(s);
- choose spokespeople who will communicate effectively with the decision-maker;
- prepare for negotiations -- what if the decision-maker offers you something close to what you want? or offers to do what you want but only under specific conditions? how will you respond?;
- prepare your "bottom-line" position -- the least you would accept from the decision-maker;
- don't leave the meeting without the decision-maker making a commitment to do specific, observable things that are steps forward toward what you want;
- don't leave the meeting without finding out how the decision-maker feels about you making public statements about what was said at the meeting; and
- ensure you have the time and resources to follow-up with the decision-maker.

Lobbying meetings can be large or small. You can invite the decision-maker to meet with several members of your group in a community centre or hall, or a few representatives of your group can meet with the decision-maker in their office.

Larger, public meetings are usually used by citizen groups to show that many people are interested in their issue/problem and support their solution(s), and to get media coverage of the meeting. If you are not sure that many people will show up for such a meeting to demonstrate their support, it is better to have a few representatives meet with the decision-maker in private.

A smaller, private meeting also allows you to ensure that your message is focussed on and very directly communicated to the decision-maker. However, you always want to show that there is broad support for the solution(s) you are proposing, so always bring along summaries of surveys/polls (if you have them) that show broad support for your position.

(c) How to Keep on Lobbying

As a wise person once said, "The squeaky wheel gets oiled." Lobbying does not stop after just one meeting with each decision-maker.

One meeting will make the decision-maker aware of your issue/problem and your group's position(s)/solution(s), but soon afterwards day-to-day pressures, crises, and other pressing issues/problems will distract the decision-maker from dealing with your issue/problem.

Make sure your strategic plan that includes the time and resources to continue lobbying.

You should meet with, or at least contact, each decision-maker whenever something happens that is related to your issue/problem, or whenever the decision-maker has not done any of the things agreed to at your lobbying meeting.

If you don't keep "squeaking" it is unlikely that your issue/problem will ever get solved.