

# HOW TO Influence Public Officials

## INFLUENCING PUBLIC OFFICIALS

The First Amendment guarantees our right “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” As citizens of a democracy, it is not only our right to participate in our government, it is our responsibility. Many Americans have little confidence in their ability to influence their elected officials, especially when their views conflict with big campaign contributors and special interests that seem to dominate the political arena. Citizens do have the ability to influence elected officials though, if they work at it.

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

MARGARET MEAD

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## UNDERSTAND PUBLIC OFFICIALS

The first step in influencing public officials is understanding them. Here are a few guidelines that are true for most, if not all, officials:

**They have a lot to do, and not a lot of time in which to do it.** *Translation:* Relationships are important because public officials rely on others for information and advice – staff people, colleagues, family members and personal friends. To be effective, you not only want to identify and influence these advisors, you want to become one of them. Start by becoming a source of reliable, timely information.

**They want to be re-elected.** *Translation:* Ultimately, it comes down to votes. Local voters have power, especially those who are part of large, influential organizations and know how to work the media. However, public officials want every constituent to think that his or her interests are being represented, and will often try to avoid taking stands on controversial issues on which voters disagree.

Money does talk and campaign contributors do purchase access and influence, but there are other ways to get your foot in the door. And remember, access does not guarantee results to contributors or anyone else.



Grassroots leaders from Dakota Rural Action and their U.S. Senators meet with President Bill Clinton.

## DEVELOP A STRATEGY AND MESSAGE

**Know the issue:** Who supports and opposes you? What are your opposition’s arguments, and how can you neutralize them?

**Know your targets:** Have the officials you’re targeting voted or made a statement on the issue? Do they have relevant interests or values? Who do they go to for information and advice on the issue?

**Know the politics:** Who are the key players, and what are their relationships to the officials you're targeting? Identify potential allies or opponents who have influence with the officials.

**Do a self-assessment:** What are your strengths and weaknesses? Do you need to build your organization's membership, train your leaders and staff, or recruit and activate allies to be effective?

## MAKING YOUR CASE

### APPEAL TO SELF-INTEREST:

Be sure to explain how your issue will affect the official's home district or issues he or she is concerned about, but discuss their personal self-interest (such as how the issue will affect their chances of re-election) with caution. Many politicians will stop listening if you suggest that they're more concerned about their career than about what is right.

### SWEET REASON:

Never forget the straight out appeal to reason and common sense, but bear in mind that what seems perfectly straightforward and reasonable to you may seem misguided to a person with different beliefs.

### APPEAL TO IDEOLOGY:

When you know that an official adheres to a particular political philosophy, it might be useful to frame your issue in terms of the tenets of that philosophy. But don't try to bend his or her beliefs too far to fit your case.

### DON'TS:

There are some basic rules that you should never violate.

- **Never lie.** Be scrupulous with facts. Your credibility is gone as soon as you say something an official knows is not true.
- **Never make a threat.** You should hold officials accountable for their actions, but it won't help your cause to threaten that they'll never win re-election, for example.
- **Don't make it personal, or take it personally.** Always be professional. It's okay to be passionate, but draw the line at hysteria and shouting.

## MAKE CONTACT

Making direct contact with an official is by no means the only means of influencing him or her. In fact, often other methods are more effective means of persuasion, but direct contact is a good place to start.

### DON'T WAIT FOR THE SESSION TO START:

You may have greater success getting an elected official's attention and building a relationship by contacting him or her before the legislative session begins. One effective approach is to begin with a voter education forum, then hold a follow-up meeting after the election. To be effective, these meetings must be even-handed and non-partisan.

### WHO SHOULD MAKE THE CONTACT?

Choose citizen lobbyists strategically. You may want to send the person who has the best relationship with the official, or it may be more effective to send people who are directly affected by the issue.

### PREPARE:

- For a meeting, **make an appointment in advance.**

If you are unable to get a meeting, try to figure out why. Is it because the official doesn't know your organization? Is it because the official is trying to avoid a confrontation?

Is it a scheduling conflict? Once you know why you couldn't get a meeting, you can decide what to do about it. It may be better to focus on media and grassroots pressure. If it's important that you speak with the official

right away, do you have an ally who can get a meeting? Can you speak with the official at a public event?



- **Assign roles:** If you're going to a meeting with more than one person, decide what will be said and who will say it. One person should be in charge of keeping the meeting on track – preferably someone who is assertive, disciplined and committed to the goals of your meeting. Another person should take a listening role, pay attention to how your arguments are being received, listen carefully to what the official has to say and ask clarifying questions if needed. At least one person should take notes, so you have a good record of your meeting.
- **Practice:** Practice is critical for meetings with more than one person. Remember, a lobby meeting should be a conversation. You want to make sure that you say and ask everything you intended to, but it's also crucial that you listen and respond to what the official has to say. Brainstorm what to expect, and role play some different scenarios.

#### IN THE MEETING:

- **Don't assume they know what you're talking about:** Public officials often won't tell you if they don't. Start by talking about the issue, and why it's important. Be brief if they know the issue, but even officials who have a long history on an issue will be energized by new developments and hearing how people are being affected. Also, just because you think they *should* know all of the insider lingo and acronyms doesn't mean that they do.
- **Ask for a demonstration of support:** Politicians are expert at sounding like they're giving you what you want. Always ask for their support, even if they sound like they won't support you, but especially if they sound like they do. If they're supportive, ask them to cosponsor the bill, send a letter, make a floor statement, commit their vote – anything to make their support public and confirm their commitment.
- **Get an answer:** Ask a direct question. Wait for an answer, even if it means sitting through a silence. If they don't answer, rephrase the question. You may not want to push for an immediate answer if they're not ready to commit one way or the other, but you should find out why.
- **What does "no" mean?** There's a difference between "I'm voting against you" and "I'm going to try to convince everyone else to vote against you, too." "No" can mean "not until you get more co-sponsors" or it can mean "I won't sign the letter, but I'll vote with you." Your job is to figure out what they mean by "no," and whether you can change it to "yes."

## IT DOESN'T END WITH A MEETING

### FOLLOW UP, FOLLOW UP, FOLLOW UP

No matter how a lobby meeting ends, you should follow up. If you got a commitment of support, put it in writing. Send a letter that states what was agreed to, and continue to stay in touch—over the phone, with staff, etc. Commitments can always be broken, and if an official has a change of heart, you don't want to learn about it after the vote has taken place or after the bill has been vetoed.



If the official was noncommittal, or if you think he or she can be swayed to support you, continue to apply pressure using your members, allies, and the media. Review your strategy.

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Hold officials who oppose you responsible for their actions. Accountability can take many forms, and is most effective when it's immediate, fair and public.

- **Immediate:** Timeliness is important, especially when you want to get media coverage. Moving quickly is also important in another sense—if you get off on the right foot by holding an official who's new to public office accountable from the start, he or she will think carefully before opposing you in the future.
- **Fair:** Accountability can be difficult, especially for multi-issue organizations, because criticizing officials on one issue may hurt your chances of getting their support on another. On the other hand, if you fail to hold officials responsible when they oppose you, it will be even more difficult to get their support or hold them to their word the next time. Accountability is most effective and least likely to damage your cause when it's proportionate to the amount of advance pressure you've built with media, grassroots organizing and direct lobbying.
- **Public:** Use the media because it works, but use it wisely. Public praise and criticism will open and close doors. Use them strategically.

# ACTIVATE YOUR MEMBERS

## MOTIVATE THEM:

The most important rule of thumb when activating members is to tell them why it's important that they act now, and what impact you believe their actions will have.

## MAKE IT EASY:

Make sure your members have all the information they need at their fingertips, such as phone numbers, a phone script, etc.

## SUPPLY BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Be sure to supply the basic background facts.

## MAKE IT PERSONAL:

Hand-written letters and personal phone calls are surprisingly rare and therefore effective. This is particularly true in the U.S. Congress. It may be easier to get 50 form letters or petition signatures than it is to get one thoughtful, hand-written letter, but the original letter may be several times more effective.

If you do decide to focus your efforts on form letters or emails, pre-printed post cards, or petition gathering, plan how many you will need to have an impact, and in what timeframe.

# USING THE MEDIA

The same rules apply when using the media to influence public officials as with any media plan, with a couple of special exceptions:

## PAPER VS. RADIO AND TV:

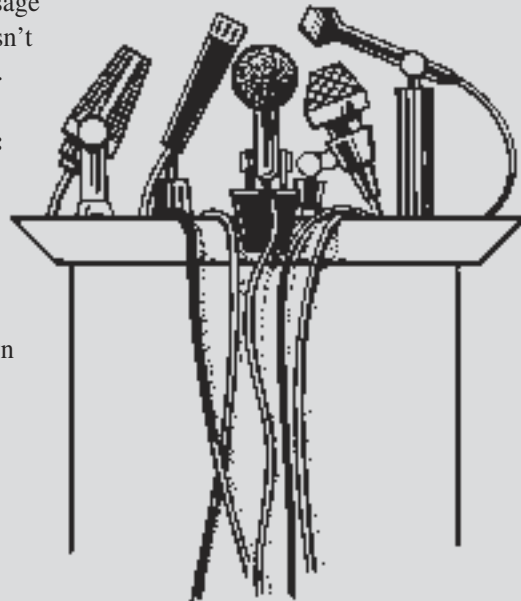
The conventional wisdom is that radio and TV coverage are more desirable than print media because their audiences are larger. Newspapers and magazines can be effective with public officials, however, especially in Washington, D.C., because paper press clips are easily saved, duplicated and distributed. Editorials are especially influential with public officials.

## PAID ADS:

Paid ads can be very effective, but they can also backfire. Use ads that solicit phone calls or letters to public officials with caution. The officials will see the ad, and if they're not flooded with calls and letters, they'll get the message that the public doesn't support your cause.

## LOCAL PRESS:

Higher profile coverage is not always more effective. An editorial in an official's home town paper may be more influential than coverage in the *New York Times*.



WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 9,700 members and 44 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

### WORC Member Groups:

Dakota Resource Council  
Dakota Rural Action  
Idaho Rural Council  
Northern Plains Resource Council  
Oregon Rural Action  
Powder River Basin Resource Council  
Western Colorado Congress

### WORC Billings Office

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## FOR MORE ON INFLUENCING PUBLIC OFFICIALS:

**How to Hold an Accountability Session** and **How to Develop a Winning Strategy** are other topics in this series.

**Being a Player:** A plain language guide to IRS regulations as they affect lobbying by non-profit organizations. Available from the Alliance for Justice for \$15. Order online at [www.allianceforjustice.org](http://www.allianceforjustice.org).

## MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and effective issue campaigns.

Topics are listed on our website – [www.worc.org](http://www.worc.org). These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for \$2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.

