



Tips for Advocates: Decision-Maker Advocacy

The power of grassroots advocacy cannot be overstated. When a state lawmaker, a local elected official, a state or local administrator, or other key decision-maker hears directly from his/her constituents on an issue, it matters. Certainly, when it comes to elected officials, they must keep their constituents happy because they want to get re-elected. But even if a decision-maker is not elected, but is appointed, he/she cares about public opinion. Make too many people unhappy, and you might find yourself out of a job. Keep people happy, and your job will be much easier to perform. Our #1 job as advocates is to make it easy for decision makers to give us what we want – and we do this by demonstrating support and providing political cover. There are many ways to apply pressure and influence on lawmakers and other decision makers. Most important is to speak up and communicate opinions clearly, persuasively, and frequently. This document provides an overview of the ways that individuals can be influential as advocates, including advocacy staff and their grassroots advocacy volunteers.

Information is power

Do your homework: It is important to get to know as much as possible about the decision-maker before communicating with him/her. Some of the questions you should attempt to answer (obviously recognizing that you won't be able to answer all) include:

- For an elected official, what is the geographic area he/she represents?
- For an appointed official, what is the scope of his/her responsibilities (including committees or subcommittee appointments), who does he/she oversee, and to whom does he/she report?
- What are the most important issues the decision-maker faces in his/her position?
- What issues is he/she passionate about?
- Is the decision-maker supportive – or likely to be supportive – of your policy issue?
- Does he/she have a personal connection to your issue?
- Who are the individuals and organizations that influence the decision-maker? Who does he/she listen to?

- What are others saying to the decision-maker about your policy issue?
- Where does he/she spend time and with whom is the decision-maker affiliated, i.e. church/temple, civic organizations, community groups, alumni organizations, etc.?



Utilize the information you've gathered to identify possible pathways of influence to that decision maker. Who do you know that might have a connection – either direct or indirect – to the decision-maker?

Persuasive Communications

- Be prepared with data and evidence that both defines the problem and defends your proposed solution.
- Use multiple vehicles to communicate: There are many ways available to you to communicate with the decision-maker. While they all matter, some will be more influential than others. For example, an email sent to a decision-maker will not carry as much weight as a telephone call. And a telephone call will not convey as much passion (and persuasion!) as an in-person visit.

- Frame your message in terms of what's in it for them to support your issue: Our number one job as advocates is to make it easy for decision-makers to give us what we want. If you can figure out what might be in it for them to support your issue, that's the best means of persuasion. Consider the following possibilities:
 - Would support of the issue provide a “hero opportunity”, i.e. a chance for the decision-maker to look good to his/her constituents and community members?
 - Are there supporters of the issue that are important to the decision-maker, i.e. would this provide an opportunity for him/her to gain favor from someone important to them?
 - Is it a fit with issues the decision-maker already cares about?
 - Are there individuals that are close to the decision-maker who support the issue?
- Build a relationship: When it comes to advocacy, it's all about relationships. Investing time in getting to know decision-makers is time well spent. Talk to them and their staff frequently, check in, ask questions, offer yourself as a resource, share new information, and work to get to know these individuals and to have them know you.
- Build relationships and communicate with those who are connected to the decision- maker.
- Follow up and follow through: If a decision-maker asks for additional information, be sure to follow up promptly. Equally important, though, is following up with additional communications – even if they haven't requested that you do so. A “one and done” advocacy approach isn't bad, but persistence and relationship-building is far better as it will convey your passion for the issue and that you aren't going away!
- Convey real stories, real impacts: When talking to a decision-maker, the most persuasive message is to talk about how the issue will affect real people. And it's even better if you can share information about real people who are the decision-maker's constituents, neighbors, friends, or colleagues and how they will be impacted.
- Be a good listener and engage in dialogue: The ideal meeting with a decision-maker is a dialogue, not a monologue. While you should be prepared with talking points you'd like to cover, be flexible and allow there to be a conversation with give and take. Remember that your goal is to build a relationship with the decision-maker – you don't need to cover all the information in your first meeting.
- Offer help and assistance: Advocates can be valuable resources to decision-makers.

- Say thank you: Everyone likes to be appreciated, and everyone appreciates a thank you. Find opportunities to thank the decision-maker.
- Make the decision-maker look good: Create hero opportunities for the decision-maker. This might mean inviting him/her to a community meeting with an opportunity to speak directly to their constituents or it could be giving an award to the decision-maker to recognize his/her contributions to the community. Look for chances to bond the decision-maker to you, your organization, and your issue by making him/her look good!
- You can provide information about their constituents and about the issue.

Specific advocacy strategies:

- Email;
- Hand-written letter;
- Telephone call;
- In-person visit;
- Social media, like Facebook and Twitter – post messages on a decision-maker’s Facebook wall or send a tweet on Twitter;
- Letters to the Editor – state and elected officials and other important decision-makers definitely read the editorial page of their local newspapers and this is a great way to communicate your message with added emphasis because it’s done publicly;
- Participate in an advocacy event or community meeting and let the decision-maker know you will be there – it’s also important to invite the decision-maker to attend;
- Rally others to communicate with decision-makers – inform co-workers, volunteers, Board members, and partner organizations about the issue and urge them to get in touch with decision-makers to communicate the same message as you to maximize your impact. Decision-makers are not accustomed to hearing from a lot of people on any one issue. In fact, some state lawmakers have commented that if they receive five phone calls on the same issue, they sit up and take notice because it must be something big!

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