



Nine Small Advocacy Tips

that Can Make a Big Difference

Advocacy isn't a mysterious process. It's just a way to build useful partnerships. Here's how.

By Michael J. Carrasco

Are you one of those nonprofit leaders who gives a wide berth to anything resembling advocacy? If so, you're selling yourself and your organization short. Advocating for your organization and taking a stand on policy issues are critical parts of your job.

Being an advocate for your organization's principles simply means communicating with public officials and forming partnerships of common interests. Government relations is no different from what any fundraiser does in terms of resource development. It's the same skill — communicating your organization's values to build beneficial relationships. And, yes, some-

Coalition building translates into momentum, and public officials pay attention to that.

times, it's about asking for funds (or for help finding funds) to advance your organization.

Let's say your board members have discussed and voted on a policy issue. They want you, the executive director, to speak to a government official about the issue. What do you do?

First of all, don't panic. Speaking with an official is much like talking to a potential donor. You'll explain what your organization does and why you want to include the official

in your work.

It sounds simple enough, and it is. But before you shake hands with anyone, you need to understand the entire process. Follow these steps to assure a smooth ride:

1. Do your homework.

Just as you would for a prospective donor, prepare, prepare, prepare! Research the issues and laws involved. Put together a "one-pager" (an easy-to-read document that summarizes your points on one piece of paper) to hand out at your meeting with the government official. In this document, relay your organization's concerns based on your understanding of the issues.

Remember that an imperfect law can always be amended.

2. Know your audience.

Many times you'll speak to a staffer. But if you'll be speaking to a state legislator or other elected official, read up on the person before the meeting. Find out the answers to some basic questions:

- **Will you be talking** to an authorizer or an appropriator? Some legislators are lucky enough to be both, but the difference is important: Authorizers sit on committees that draft legislation for programs and policies. Appropriators sit on committees that dole out money.
- **Is this official** a senior player or a junior member?
- **What is this official's record** on the issues?

3. Learn to tell a good story.

Mark Twain once wrote, "Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising." What better way to get a problem fixed than by telling a well crafted anecdote? Your story should illustrate the problem, outline the ramifications, clarify the right course of action, and show how your organization can help.

Lots of people may want to help you but need to be asked.

4. Follow basic etiquette.

When the day of your meeting with the government official arrives, be on time. If you're running late, phone ahead and let someone know. Address everyone in a professional and courteous manner. Thank them for their time.

5. Listen carefully.

Give public officials or their staffers the opportunity to express their thoughts. Don't interrupt, and don't demand decisions on the spot.

6. Be helpful.

After you've heard what the public official has to say, ask questions that show you want to help. Are there regional problems you might help resolve? Are there other groups that agree with your position and might join you?

Allow time for questions that the elected official or anyone else in the room may have. If you're asked something you don't know, offer to find the answer. This affords a valuable opportunity to follow up and build your partnership.

"Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising."

7. Follow up.

When you get back to your office, send hand-written notes to the people you spoke with. Mention that you appreciate the time they gave you and that you look forward to working with them in the future. Emphasize the ways you hope to assist them.

8. Understand the process.

Crafting legislation is a noisy, messy operation, often likened to watching sausage being made. As you put groups together, lots of "editors" will contribute to your original idea. Many hands — some overt and some covert — will be working the legislative system. It's a process that can sometimes be slow and frustrating and sometimes faster than you can blink your eyes. Even when changes seem to dilute the good you intended, know when to declare victory. Remember that an imperfect law can always be amended.

9. Keep building.

Lots of people may want to help you but need to be asked. Don't forget to ask them.

Coalition building translates into momentum, and public officials pay attention to that. Brainstorm ways to bring more people into the equation. Are there major employ-

ers in the public official's home state or district who support your position? Bring them in! Would creating a media event get people to participate? Set it up! Are lawmakers having trouble finding co-sponsors for a piece of legislation? Put on your walking shoes and pound the pavement to locate some.

Advocacy is about communication — communicating to the public, communicating to specific audiences. It's a big job, but the more partners you have highlighting the same issues the better. Government officials, organizations, and even corporate America want to be seen as working hard. Invite enough participants and structure events so that the result is good coverage, showing all the partners doing good work, together. ■

Michael J. Carrasco (michaeljcarasco@gmail.com) has worked on Capitol Hill and for America's Promise-the Alliance for Youth. Recently he was appointed to the Virginia Commission on National and Community Service. He also serves as chair of the Special Education Advisory Committee and member of the Consumer Affairs Commission for the City of Alexandria, Virginia.