



Keys to Becoming an Effective Legislative Advocate (The Top Ten List)

Presented By

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The Texas Legislative Session is just around the corner. From January to June our State Legislators will be confronted with literally thousands of issues and proposed pieces of legislation. As the old saying goes, “*No Mans Life, Liberty, or Property is Safe When the Legislature is in Session!*” Due to the sheer volume of proposals, many members of the legislature are confronted with debating issues upon which they have little first hand experience.

By becoming an effective advocate for your specific area of concern, you not help ensure that your legislative goals are carried out, but you also help ensure that our legislative system operates with the necessary checks and balances. In short the information you provide elected decision makers helps to create better laws. With this important role in mind, I have tried to provide you with the ten most important rules to ensuring you are an effective advocate for your issues.

The Top Ten List for Being an Effective Advocate (David Letterman would be proud!):

1. ***Develop your Relationships Early:*** Waiting until the hectic high-stress legislative session to make your first introductions to a legislative member or their staff is a recipe for failure. Get to know your members of the legislature (both your Representatives & Senators) and their staffs. Set up appointments with legislative members and staff to provide them with “background” on your important issues.
2. ***Produce Written Summaries:*** Be able to leave behind your message and key points. Providing written summaries is a very important aspect to effectively advocating in the legislative process. Written summaries will ensure that your key points and message live on well beyond the 30 minute meeting you have with the elected official. Additionally, staff uses written summaries for briefings once the issue comes back up on the legislative agenda. For example, you may have a meeting in January and the committee hearing on the issue will not come around until late March. If you have provided a written summary of your key points, the legislative staff will be able to refer to the materials even if they have long since forgotten the main points you made in person.
3. ***Have a Game Plan:*** Don’t just schedule meetings to check the box and say we have met with Representative So and So. Have a concise and defined message that you want to convey when have a meeting during the legislative session.
4. ***Make Yourself and Your Organization a Resource:*** Legislative members and their staffs love finding people who can provide them reliable information on issues that they must address. During the development of your relationships with elected officials be sure to provide them with all of your contact information and make the offer to serve as resource. For example, let them know you are more than happy to review and comment on proposed legislation (even before it gets filed!).

5. ***Be Able to Respond Quickly:*** A day in a legislative session (especially in the later months of session) can be the equivalent of years. Legislation and business moves at light speed during the legislative session. If you want to effect the outcome of the process you must be able to respond on very short notice. Waiting a week during the legislative session to deal with a request by a legislative member's office is somewhat pointless.

6. ***Personalize Your Communications:*** Often times individuals send "form letters" that they receive from state organizations to members of the legislature. Most of the times these form letters get filed in the proverbial "file 13." Using a form letter to form the basis of your letter is ok, but you must *personalize the story*. For example, when talking about a HOT issue discuss how *popular local programs in the members district* is funded from the tax. Personalizing the message will help to ensure the effectiveness of all your communications.

7. ***Keep Your Organizations Informed:*** Effective legislative advocacy efforts usually begin and end with the sharing of "reliable intelligence." If you have a good or bad meeting with a legislative member be sure to share that information with others in your group. The sharing of information allows organizations and individuals who support your cause to adjust their messages and strategies to ensure your end goals are met.

8. ***Recognize Political Realities:*** Some members of the legislature for whatever reason are not going to agree with your stated positions. This reality is to be expected and is in fact healthy for our overall governmental system. When you encounter a member who is hostile to your position, do not become confrontational. Instead, attempt to find common ground with the member and let them know that you understand and respect their position. This type of strategy will often times lead once hostile members to at least attempt to find a middle ground that they can support. Most members of the legislature do not want to pick a fight just to fight about an issue.

9. ***Don't be Afraid to Ask:*** This point is closely related to number 3 (Have a Game Plan). Often times individuals will have a meeting with a legislator or send them a letter and fail to do the single most important thing.....ASK for ACTION. Don't be afraid to ask a member to "please support or oppose" a specific bill or proposal. There are some meetings during session that are simply informative in nature, but the vast majority of meetings will be outcome oriented.

10. ***Say Thanks:*** After all of the work is done make sure to express your appreciation to elected officials and their staffs. This expression of gratitude should be expressed both privately and publicly. Letters to the editors and recognition at local events are very effective *public* ways to express your thanks. Expression of thanks should not be contingent on the outcome of your efforts. Expressing gratitude will ensure you keep your supports fighting for your goals.