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How to Avoid the Tripping Point During Your Advocate Hill and State House Visits

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Grassroots advocate Hill visits are a necessary activity for groups who are serious about impacting the legislative process. Why don't these opportunities create raging grassroots thunder dogs? Why don't the visits result in converted legislators?

To make an impression with our advocates and legislators, we must go beyond the stultifying boring "dos and don'ts" of legislative communications and empower our advocates to *influence*, rather than *present*, the organization's position and their personal story to their legislator. However, many groups stubbornly cling to the tired ways of advocate development without respect for the *calling*, *managing expectations*, and *the science of influence*.

Our observations over the years reveal how your group can avoid "the tripping point" and leverage your Hill visits for accelerated grassroots momentum.

Respect the Calling

We are completely convinced that one reason advocacy development tactics, and hence, Hill visits fall short is because, in addition to the ubiquitous legislative update disguised as a motivational tactic, we use a "one size fits all" advocacy development approach. This neglects the *calling* of the particular profession or trade. Each trade association or corporation requires a different advocacy development approach based on the talents and skills that draw the advocate to their chosen profession.

For example, when a hospitality-related industry hired us to prep their advocates prior to their Hill visits, we asked the staff about their specific advocacy challenges. They stated that their members were chemically incapable of asking for their legislator's vote. The reason for their reticence was the *calling*. Hospitable people are generally conflict averse. And people who are conflict averse tend to avoid using heavy-duty influence tactics. That's OK. There are lots of tools in the influence toolbox, many of which work well for people who don't like to apply inordinate pressure.

Contrast this with medical professionals, who are readily given authority in their daily work. It's uncommon for anyone to challenge their directives. When we work with them, we take a very different approach. They have vastly different perspectives, expectations, and communications styles than the hospitality folks. To maximize their impact, the development skills imparted are consistent with their values and strengths.

We have witnessed Million-Dollar Roundtable salespeople become mute before their Member of Congress. World-class scientists have gone full-speed sideways into legislator meetings and leave dejected. We would never approach a group of doctors the same way we would approach chemists, or public health advocates, or financial planners. The callings are too diverse to pull something off the shelf. To maximize their impact, we must build their communications and influence skills from the strengths innate in their calling.

Manage Expectations

I was reminded of expectations on a recent visit to my hand surgeon. I am always trying to convert individuals to be more politically active. This treatment is especially meted out to any and all medical professionals she encounters, since I have to endure interminable office wait times. I'll never forget the comment of my hand surgeon when he confessed that he had attended numerous Capitol Hill events. I asked him how he would evaluate the experience. He testily replied, "Well, it seems like a waste of time when I had to talk to a young guy with slicked back hair who didn't know anything about the issue. I don't know if I'll participate again."

"I wasn't surprised at the situation, but I was disappointed for him that he found the experience to be such a waste of time," she said. All of us have informed our advocates that they will likely speak with Congressional staff, rather than their Member of Congress, during their Hill visit. **From a strictly scientific perspective of influence, this is a prescription for advocacy failure.**

When a young person is being persuaded by an older, experienced, and even more successful person (as are most individuals who have the time and money to attend these events), the advocate is at an immediate disadvantage. There is virtually no similarity, little liking, and even less trust, all of which the scientific literature reveals are essential to successful influence.

I've even had advocates ask me, "Is it normal that my Congressman isn't able to see me? I have held two fundraisers for him in the last few years. His staff told me it didn't matter, he was too busy to see me." Besides the fact that this office likely learned management supervision from the Enron school of management, this situation is an example of the disconnect between young staff and older advocates. To enhance our effectiveness, we must know the science behind influence and apply it to our persuasion opportunities.

Utilizing the Science of Influence – For Advocates and Professional Lobbyists

There are scores of tools in the influence toolbox, and the savvy agent knows how to use the right tool for a particular client and situation. That said, we've noticed that there are some tools that work particularly well for political advocacy across a range of situations. Among them are *trust building, proximity, metaphor, and narrative*.

Trust building is the essential ingredient in credibility, but it's a skill that's often overlooked while attempting to demonstrate expertise. The social sciences have identified several tactics that can establish trustworthiness rapidly. We focus on trust building skills with authority figures, such as doctors, scientists, senior organization leaders and business owners.

Proximity is a humble tool whose power is often underestimated, particularly in an age of mass communications and push-button correspondence. *Over and over again, the research literature – and experience – demonstrates the power of face-to-face*

communication. This is why it's critical to facilitate your advocate's consistent face-to-face interaction with their legislators, beyond fly-ins and fundraisers.

Metaphor is a fast-track route to influence, and requires remarkably little thought on the part of the prospect. An appropriate metaphor will cause a new topic to be perceived as similar to a previous topic, and when this match occurs, the prospect *self-persuades*.

Finally, narrative—telling a story—is a rich and profoundly powerful way to persuade. We believe

that narrative is a “stealth” tactic because its persuadability is largely unnoticed, while being both pleasurable and engaging to hear. This is exactly the tactic we taught to the hospitality industry. The naturally non-confrontational advocates were more comfortable with telling their personal stories than reciting facts and statistics.

Our advocates are high-altitude people. They are competent at brokering the deal, making the sale, and persuading recalcitrant subordinates. We are wasting their strengths, and hampering our legislative agendas, when we don't truly equip them to make a difference.

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