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Lobbying, Voices

6 steps to increase the effectiveness of your lobby day efforts

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Amy Showalter

Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

Each year, legislators at the federal and state level meet with their constituents during so-called annual "lobby day" events. It's important for grassroots volunteers to have a meaningful connection with their elected representatives and/or legislative staff, and these meetings provide that opportunity. As with any organizational initiative, having the "right" participants in your lobby day is essential.

Step 1: Determine Your Strategic Outcomes

What is the influence outcome and behavioral result you want from your event? Is your strategy to create awareness of your issue? Is it to persuade lawmakers to oppose or support legislation? Is it a meet and greet? Is it to "make your voice heard? Are you encouraging your stakeholders to use this opportunity to start developing a working relationship with their lawmakers?

Betsy Vetter, Regional Vice President of Government Relations, at the American Heart Association, recently said, “I think they key is, you have to decide what your real goals are with the event. Do you want to ‘wow’ them with how many people come to your event? Do you want to ‘wow’ them with quality advocates that are prepared? Sometimes you need a crowd, sometimes you don’t.”

Step 2: Provide Realistic Expectations

Many organizations promote meeting with lawmakers as an action that will make sure their “voice is heard.” In doing so, they expect to secure their lawmaker’s vote on issues that matter to them. Setting up our advocates this way has a deleterious effect.

It’s an example of expectancy theory developed by management expert Victor Vroom, who found a simple yet profound explanation for the de-motivation dilemma. He found that “When expectations do not meet reality, people are de-motivated.” Simple yet profound. In reality, meeting one’s legislator is only one step toward influence and developing a quality working relationship.

Step 3: Let Your Teams Lead

I am increasingly persuaded that what the government relations profession needs is leadership skills among staff and volunteers. Eric Dell, Senior Vice President, Government Affairs at the National Automated Merchandising Association (NAMA) has seen a 30 percent increase in NAMA’s fly-in attendance from, among many factors, instituting volunteer leadership into their lobby day event.

“In 2015 we assembled a volunteer leadership team for the event. These leaders were our event ‘Captains.’ Their duties were to drive participation and excitement. In 2015, there were 14 industry and association leaders from every region of the country. In 2016, we expanded that number to 65. We distributed weekly captain updates which kept them informed of registration and event offering. This kept Captains engaged and excited and assisted them in securing new participants. It also provides target states every week to increase participation from a broader number of states,” Dell said.

Step 4: Customize It

Options are always preferable to obtain quality involvement in your lobby day. Many organizations are freshening their fly-ins via smaller, targeted events. In a highly customized format, The American Trucking Associations gives their state executives the autonomy to select, based on their particular issue concerns and strategy, the week(s) they want to come to Capitol Hill to meet with legislators. This enables the ATA’s issues to be consistently represented from the grassroots.

According to Kathleen Gamble, ATA’s Director of Political Affairs, “A big benefit of our continual presence is that there is always an important issue moving through the Congress. Some associations bring their stakeholders to

D.C. when their issue isn't moving, which can be a challenge."

Step 5: Lift the Veil

Because your stakeholders can get the "how a bill becomes law" information online, consider lifting the veil on your legislative strategy. Meaghan Killion Joyce, Political Affairs Manager at International Paper shared another small change in the information presented to their lobby day participants that has had a big impact on their lobby day.

"We prep our folks two weeks in advance on the issues rather than waiting for them to come to town. We host a prep webinar where we reveal the *strategy behind the meetings* we are setting up. Meetings are better received on the Hill as our people are more prepared for the meeting and not just going through the motions. We've been able to move the needle more on issues and our participants feel like they made a difference and the trip was "worth their time." It pumps them up and they go back to their colleagues to share the story of their experience which helps demonstrate Government Relations value."

Step 6: Transfer of Knowledge vs. Motivation

Another reason your "right" people may not attend your lobby day is because the programs preceding the legislator meetings are 90 percent transfer of knowledge and 10 percent motivation. It's one thing to impart knowledge, it's quite another to motivate your participants to be active in the legislative process throughout the year. While necessary, a "legislative update" is not motivational, it's a transfer of knowledge. Keep your legislative update, but include some motivational content.