

Eight Tips for a Successful Lobby Visit



Meeting with your members of Congress or their staff and developing a personal relationship are the most effective ways to influence the legislators' positions on an issue. Phone calls, faxes, emails, and letters are all important but are not as effective as meeting with your members of Congress or their staff.

- 1. Make an appointment.** Schedule the lobby visit in advance; don't just show up. A broad-based delegation of constituents (five is ideal) increases the likelihood of getting a meeting with the legislator rather than his or her staff. Fax the scheduler with your written meeting request (who, where, when, and why), and follow up with a phone call. Many offices ignore a request for meeting with their member of Congress if it's not made in writing. Use your company or organization's letterhead when faxing the request and mention that you will put a picture of your legislator meeting with you on your group's website. If your lobby visit is in Washington, DC, you should ask to meet with at least a legislative assistant.
- 2. Prepare for the lobby visit.** Information on your legislator's co-sponsorship of bills and previous votes is available at www.fcnl.org (click on "Contact Congress" in the left column and then enter your zip code). You can also find valuable personal information about your legislator on his or her home page by following the links from "Contact Congress." Have a face-to-face pre-meeting with your delegation to determine who will cover which points and who is going to "chair" the meeting to keep it on topic.
- 3. Be punctual and positive.** Be on time, and thank the staff person for his or her time. Even if you disagree on most issues, compliment the member of Congress for a vote or action you appreciated. Building rapport with staff is important in developing a long-term relationship.

- 4. Focus the meeting.** Briefly introduce the individuals of the group, the organizations you represent, and the topic you wish to discuss. It is important to talk about only one issue and to stay on this topic. Remember, you don't have to be an expert on an issue; members of Congress meet with you because you elect them.

- 5. Listen and gather information.** Ask for your legislator's view on an issue. Be patient and passionate; don't react angrily if you don't get the response you want. Remain polite.
- 6. Make a specific request.** Rather than something generic like "I want you to support the environment," a more effective "ask" is to request support for a specific bill or legislative action: "I would like Congressman Doe to support H.R. 1234, the Tree Planting Act." Give several brief points why your member of Congress should support this legislation. Avoid a long philosophical debate about the issue; be concrete.
- 7. Follow up.** Tell the staff person you will get back to him or her if you can't provide information about an issue on the spot. If the staff person is unfamiliar with a bill or is unsure of the legislator's position, ask for follow-up correspondence. Leave one or two pages of relevant material.
- 8. Express your thanks.** At the end of the meeting, thank the staff person for his or her time. Send a thank you letter to the staff person soon after your visit, repeating your "ask." This letter helps to build a relationship over time with a member of Congress and her or his staff.

It often takes several meetings with a member of Congress or his or her staff to influence legislative action. A lobby visit is important to establish a relationship with a congressional office and to get congressional attention on an issue, but make sure to follow up with phone calls, faxes, emails, and letters to the editor.

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