

Lobbying Lawmakers

Lobbying isn't just for high-priced industry representatives; it's something anyone can do. In fact, few things impress lawmakers more than citizens willing to pay them a personal visit. Whether it's to discuss local issues or national topics, meeting with elected officials—from representatives in Congress to state legislators or county supervisors—can influence policies that affect the arts.

You don't have travel to Washington, DC, or even your state capital to meet with your elected officials, because they return to their home districts regularly, usually on weekends, national holidays, and district work periods. In addition, legislators often hold town meetings to solicit constituents' views. These are opportunities for you, as an individual or representing a group, to influence policy. If your issue is specific to your community, you can meet with local officials, such as city council members and county supervisors, to discuss how they can support the arts in your area.

There is no single "right" way to lobby.

While following general guidelines, you should also trust your own personal style when meeting with public officials.

Your visit should accomplish both short- and long-term goals. Short-term goals may include persuading your lawmaker to vote for pending arts legislation, co-sponsor an arts-friendly bill, or to oppose legislation that would reduce arts funding. Long-term goals may include developing a relationship with an elected official and his or her staff and educating them on the issues.

When you meet with elected officials, you present two messages. The first is substantive and specific, such as: "Please support an amendment that would increase funding for the National Endowment for the Arts." During any of Americans for the Arts' "Advocacy 101" sessions, the most important thing you'll learn is to **always make an "ask."** Don't just educate the lawmaker—tell them specifically what you want them to do.

The second message is more broad and political; you deliver that message simply by walking through the door. That there are constituents willing to take the time to present their views in person is a powerful message and one that lobbyists cannot hope to match, no matter how knowledgeable they are about the technicalities of an issue. **While it helps to know the substance of an issue, constituents are not expected to know every detail of a piece of legislation.** It's always okay to say, "I don't know the answer to that question, but I'll get back to you." In the meantime, the other message—the political message—gets delivered.

Here are a few tips on how to set up a meeting in a lawmaker's district:

Getting an Appointment:

Call the legislator's district office and request a meeting during the recess, when your legislator is home. Many lawmakers are in their districts Friday–Monday, as well. The appointment secretary will want to know what the meeting is about. Limit your agenda to only a couple of items, or better yet, one topic. **Polite but firm persistence through regular contact with the district's office is essential.** If you can't get an appointment during the upcoming recess, express your disappointment—and immediately request a firm commitment for the next time the legislator is back home.

If you don't know who your congressional delegation or state lawmakers are, visit Americans for the Arts' E-Advocacy Center, at www.capwiz.com/artsusa, and click "Elected Officials."

Planning an Effective Meeting:

Lobbying in a small group is optimal. Consider forming a local coalition with representatives from other groups and constituencies, including other arts groups, student groups, performers, etc.

Before the meeting, get your group together and decide who will say what. If possible, prepare a brief fact sheet about the issue and letters from your groups that you can leave with the legislator and his or her staff. (You should always feel free to contact Americans for the Arts for any information, such as Creative Industries maps, economic impact information, etc.) Be sure to list the names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of each person in your group.

Expect your meeting to be brief. Find out in advance from the lawmaker's staff how much time you'll have and be sure to cover your key points early on. Ask the legislator for specific action: "Representative Jones, we urge you to support a \$36.5 million budget for arts education."

Try to find a local angle. How does this issue affect the arts in your community? For example, has your district received an Arts in Education grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Americans for the Arts can provide you with this information). Divide your agenda so that everyone in your group has a chance to speak. Ask for the legislator or staffer's business card before you leave so that you can follow up on the meeting.

Meeting Etiquette:

Be on time and dress conservatively. Whatever your feelings about the virtues of sartorial self-expression, it's just good sense to avoid distracting or detracting from your message with radical fashions while meeting with lawmakers. Best to abide by the old adage, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Always remain polite while holding true to your convictions. Think of lobbying as an opportunity for you to express your perspective with integrity and passion. Remember your goal of building a long-term working relationship with a lawmaker.

Be sure to introduce yourselves at the outset of the meeting. Have your leader give a brief introduction about your organization or coalition. State up front your reasons for seeking the meeting.

Endless Pressure, Endlessly Applied:

Follow up your meeting with a thank-you letter, along with any additional information you may have promised. Take the opportunity to build rapport with your elected official and his or her staff. If you don't get the response you want, keep trying. **But don't be discouraged if you can't see eye-to-eye with your legislator on every issue;** there's always another issue down the road. Persistence is key.

After the meeting, write down your thoughts about it. Be sure to note any questions the lawmaker or his or her staff may have had so that you can follow up. Keep this report on file so that you can refer to it when approaching that lawmaker on future issues. Lobbying lawmakers not only gives you an opportunity to express your views, but also allows you to gather political intelligence and build relationships for the future.

Also, give Americans for the Arts a call to discuss your meeting. We may be able to provide you with further information to build your case.

E-Advocacy

It's important to remember that you don't need to have a face-to-face meeting with your elected officials. While personal visits are still the most effective way of communicating with legislators, e-mail is a vital form of advocacy as well. Be sure to consult Americans for the Arts' E-Advocacy Center at www.capwiz.com/artsusa for the latest legislative information. There you will find numerous messages that you can send to your elected officials, as well as links to state E-Advocacy Centers. If you would like to initiate a local campaign, we can help arrange this for you. Contact Americans for the Arts' Government Affairs and Grassroots at 202.371.2830.

Lobbying lawmakers can be an empowering experience, and is a form of grassroots activism that has consistently helped increase arts funding. You have clout when you make your voice heard. Remember, speaking from the heart about your commitment to the arts is your greatest strength.

TOP 10 THINGS TO DO WHEN TALKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

10. Schedule. Find out when your elected officials will be in their home districts and make an appointment in advance.

9. Be flexible. Members' schedules get juggled at a moment's notice. Understand that your appointment may be moved, or that you may be asked to meet with a staff person instead.

8. Inform. Let the lawmaker's office know your issues when you call to make an appointment.

7. Be prepared. Know the facts of the issue, and be prepared with good arguments.

6. Take (or consult) an expert. Members are less likely to "skip" meetings with groups than individuals. Bringing a local expert, or community or business leader concerned with your issue helps reinforce your position. You should always feel free to contact Americans for the Arts in advance of your meetings as well.

5. Be on time. And, be willing to wait. Delayed appointments can actually be beneficial if they give you time to get to know the member's staff. Keep in mind that meeting with staff can be as productive as seeing the member personally.

4. Pick a spokesperson. When visiting as a group, one person should start the meeting and be the spokesperson. Before the meeting, decide the key points that should be covered, and who will raise which points.

3. Be positive, friendly, and brief. Stick to the issues and facts, and don't outstay your welcome. Congressional offices are friendly places, but they are also places of intense activity.

2. Make the ask. The biggest error that a lobbyist can make is informing a legislator about an issue **but not telling them what to do about it.** The purpose of your visit is to ask the legislator to take action. Make sure you make the ask and, if possible, secure a commitment from the legislator to honor your request.

1. Send a thank you. When you get home, write a "thank you" to your member of Congress and any staff with whom you may have met.

Remember, **your elected officials work for you, not vice versa.** It's important to tell them how important the arts are to their constituents.