



Book Be Your Own Lobbyist

How to Give Your Small Business Big Clout with State and Local Government

Amy Handlin
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Recommendation

If you’re a small business owner and think you have to endure a mind-numbing civics class to lobby effectively, here’s good news: Author Amy Handlin shows you how to contact and educate your local and state elected officials so you can enlist their support. Using the simple formula of “target, tools and tactics,” she shows business owners – or anyone who needs to lobby – the best ways to reach lawmakers. Her guidance is written for people in the United States, but she shares broadly applicable methods. The book includes an appendix chock-full of writing samples and resources. This manual is basic but interesting, and it doesn’t talk down to its audience, though you might quibble with some of the author’s stylistic choices. Still, *BooksInShort* believes that because it removes the mysteries behind lobbying without being dull, and because it offers a practical step-by-step lobbying process, this book is well worth a small business owner’s time – especially any small business owner with a regulatory ax to grind.

Take-Aways

- Lobbying can help small business owners protect their profits.
- Lobbying is most effective at the local and state levels.
- Business owners who lobby should follow the “target-tools-tactics” strategy.
- Carefully research your targeted public official to ensure that you are lobbying the right person.
- Your lobbying tools include written and nonwritten communications.
- Tactically frame your message by imagining yourself in your targets’ place and explaining how getting what you want will help them.
- Back up all your contentions and published statements with data and research.
- Know the laws that govern your lobbying and political activities inside and out, including regulations about making political contributions.
- Recognize that productive lobbying is a process that takes time and requires building relationships, knowledge and even the right professional terms or jargon.
- Lobbying is an honorable activity that can enhance your stature as a leader in your industry and your community.

Summary

“Getting Ready to Lobby”

What should you do if you are a small business owner with a problem that requires action from someone in government? Because many people compete for the time and attention of elected officials, you must prepare yourself to lobby effectively. Employ the “three building blocks” of lobbying: “target, tools and tactics.” Your target is the person (for example, a mayor) or the group of people (say, a zoning board) with the ability and authority to resolve your problem. Your tools are the ways you

communicate with those people. Some tools are written, but not all. Your tactics are the methods you use to craft your message to penetrate the clutter so your target hears you.

“No citizen should be put off by the trappings of power – big offices, gold domes, fancy titles – because that power ultimately resides with the public.”

First, learn the basic structures of your state and local government. Will you be dealing with a strong mayor? A county commission? A city manager? To determine where to start, ask three “guidepost” questions: In which jurisdiction does your problem have the biggest impact? Does it involve a “money trail”? And what can you find out in public documents? As you perform this research, you are preparing to exercise a right that appears in the United States Constitution: to petition your government for redress of grievances. Lobbying does not have to be “sleazy” or “futile”; the cards are not stacked against you. You can reach your elected officials and have your voice heard, if you take care to do it right.

Know Your Target

Once you know which person or governmental body can address your concern, learn all you can. The Internet can be very valuable, especially if you need to read decision makers’ voting histories, transcripts of public meetings, or tax and property records. You now can download many documents that once had to be fetched from city hall. Sometimes, blogs can be a resource, but they may not always contain comprehensive records. Many blogs are partisan and omit details to promote their agendas. The government itself, at each level, offers many online resources. In addition to online research, do some basic digging for facts. Go to public meetings to hear more about your issue or to see what your target officials are like in person. Network with others who have done business with them. Watch public meetings on local TV, and familiarize yourself with ongoing issues and how your targets react to them. If you need more information, you can request it under the Freedom of Information Act.

“A variety of tools are available and accessible to every aspiring advocate. With practice, you can wield them with as much skill as a professional lobbyist.”

Try to build a relationship with your targets gradually, not just because relationships take time to nurture (they do) but also because you want to become acquainted with people before your issue turns into an emergency. You may approach them to schedule appointments, or invite them to speak at an event or join a panel discussion. If your targets have staff members, include them in your relationship building. You may also form a coalition to communicate the importance of your cause. Small businesses often lobby jointly to improve their outreach efforts and visibility.

The Tools of Effective Communication

As a lobbyist, your tools can be written communiqués such as letters, emails and public-meeting testimony. Email is fast, but your message can get lost amid a thousand others. To preserve its impact, “keep it simple, straightforward” and short. A letter delivered by postal mail now packs a more impressive punch, since many people assume that email has overtaken traditional mail as a method of communication. Your letter can include data, graphs or photos that the recipient might block or toss away as email attachments. Be sure that you spell your target’s name correctly, and get his or her title right.

“Decision-makers are the most influential people in government, but they are by no means the only ones who matter.”

The nonwritten forms of communication at your disposal include contacting your target by phone, or holding meetings or rallies. Phone calls often have limited effectiveness, but they work better if you prepare your message. Refer to a script or outline if necessary. One-on-one meetings are effective if your target official “must touch, smell, taste or otherwise handle something in order to understand or evaluate your case.” Organizing a community meeting or rally can be time-consuming, but it’s worthwhile if you can get media coverage. Keep your public events dignified; avoid “so-called guerrilla marketing tactics.” You also can use a petition drive as a “marketing device...to get attention, encourage word-of-mouth and generate excitement.”

Managing Your Message

Take care to frame and control your message. Consider yourself in your targets’ roles, and ask what would appeal to them about solving your problem. Does your concern clearly relate to any official’s “signature issues”? As you frame your message, prepare yourself to handle opposition and offer alternatives. For example, if you want your municipality to abolish a parking fee, try to suggest ways for the city to replace that money in its budget.

“Sometimes a conversation or meeting with office staff is all it will take to solve your problem...but for anything out of the ordinary, you will need the ear of an elected or appointed decision-maker.”

Make sure your message is understandable. If you’re deeply familiar with your issue, you may not be aware that others aren’t as informed. Avoid jargon. Don’t inundate people with research and data. While you will be the main messenger, consider additional speakers to help you press your case: perhaps “opinion leaders” or a young person if your cause involves children. However you communicate, be sure to strike the right tone. “Build your case gradually and calmly,” offer substantive backup evidence and tell the truth. In addition to these messages, you also may distribute information that you can manage but can’t control. For example, if the press presents your case instead of you, relinquishing control is part of the package. As with government officials, cultivating relationships with reporters is a worthwhile investment of time.

“Few town halls are rife with corruption. While money can (sometimes) buy attention and access, votes matter, too.”

To generate press coverage, you can serve as a helpful source, issue press releases, submit a letter to the editor or write an opinion piece. Your press release or “media advisory” should follow the “who, what, when, where and why” model that reporters use. Explain why your announcement is important. If you write an op-ed piece, keep it no longer than 750 words. Make your argument using two or three important reasons. Provide a personal context to raise reader interest. A good letter to the editor should offer a fresh take on an item that the paper has covered. Make your letter relevant to your concern. Be brief; newspapers will edit or reject letters that are too long. Other methods for generating press coverage include planning and managing a relevant “news event” or calling a talk radio program – although that can be

risky, depending on the time limits on callers and the radio host's personality.

But Is Lobbying Political?

Well, yes, “lobbying often gets entangled with politics,” and that has benefits and drawbacks. You can navigate the political landscape if you stay informed. For example, you should know that making political contributions in exchange for an official's later support is against the law. Learn the laws in your jurisdiction before you make a monetary or in-kind donation. Never assume. If you're not sure, ask an attorney. Never make a campaign donation in cash, never accept reimbursement for a contribution and don't lend money to a campaign. If you donate computer equipment, don't let it be used for “cyber-deception,” such as phishing emails. You can certainly volunteer to help a campaign, host an event, put up signs, write letters, speak at rallies, make calls and drive voters to the polls on Election Day.

“Every [political] race is different, and every candidate deserves to be considered on his merits.”

Scandals in Washington have led to new lobbying rules and restrictions, though most of them apply to professional lobbyists, not to you. Beware of “ethics hot spots,” including “gifts, conflicts of interest and use of confidential information.” A conservative approach is prudent. If you're not sure about taking a certain step, don't take it. Do not make offers that could be misinterpreted. Avoid anyone who offers suspicious information. If you think you see illegal behavior, report it. Lobbying also may bring you “unwelcome attention”: unflattering media coverage, junk mail and annoying calls. To handle such eventualities, stay abreast of what is said about you, use available resources to stop spam and refuse to let these nuisances knock you off your stride.

Doing Business with the Government

If you're interested in obtaining a government contract, repeat the target-tools-tactics approach. For your target, find out which government entity would buy your goods or services. Check what it has purchased in past years and what it paid. The tools you should use depend on whether the purchaser issues an “Invitation for Bids” (IFB) or a “Request for Proposal” (RFP). An IFB indicates that the buyer has a budget and will select a “vendor based primarily on price.” A less exacting RFP “signals an interest in new ideas and a willingness to negotiate.” The government also issues “no-bid contracts,” granting projects without competition. This can happen in an emergency, or if only one business makes a product or can perform a service.

“Your lobbying effort can boost your bottom line whether or not you get the decision, vote or contract you hoped for. That's because of all you have acquired and experienced along the way.”

Strategically, pursue bids with the same framing approach that works in lobbying. Consider the officials' viewpoint. Explain why the buyer benefits from selecting your firm, and be prepared for rivals to emerge. Do your homework, and carefully prepare your written materials.

“Sample Challenges”

As a lobbyist, continue to use the target-tools-tactics structure to tackle other matters, such as seeking a regulatory exemption, opposing an unjust local regulation, trying to overturn a state law that harms your firm, appealing a tax assessment, complaining about a public nuisance or protesting an unfair contract award. “Learn the insider vocabulary of each area to establish and maintain your credibility.” Then proceed along these lines:

- **“How to seek a variance”** – A variance is a “one-time waiver...granted by an appointed citizens' panel generally known as a zoning board of appeals or a board of adjustment.” That board is your audience, so get to know the members as you would any other lobbying target. Frame your message by explaining how your variance helps your fellow business owners; show how local firms will suffer losses if the variance is not approved. Be prepared to respond to opposition. To win a variance, you do not need to be an important person or have a lawyer. Just be “reasonable” and professional.
- **“How to fight a local ordinance”** – If a local law hurts your business, lobby the governing body that passed the law. Attend its meetings and learn your targets' personalities and preferences. Your tools include letters, emails and, particularly, petitions. Testifying before the panel or governmental body is also an option. Your tactics include explaining why the law is inequitable, how it causes harm and what “practical alternatives” are available.
- **“How to change a state law”** – Even if your state house member or senator had nothing to do with the regulation that is affecting your business, begin by speaking to them individually. Visit the statehouse to meet them. You can use emails and letters, but your best tool is an in-person meeting. Tactically, show the fairness of changing the law and how it harms not just you but also others. Outline good alternatives.
- **“How to work a public meeting”** – Testifying at a public meeting gives you an opportunity to convey an effective written and spoken message. Introduce yourself to the panel members and the press, participate during the allocated time for public comment and stay until the end. The officials you speak to generally will appreciate your insight and expertise, but be sure to follow their rules on procedure.
- **“How to address a public body”** – To present your testimony, ask in advance for a speaking time. Be prepared, refrain from making jokes and avoid rhetorical questions.
- **“How to hold a press conference”** – Offer reporters a “press kit” about your issue and, before the event, practice answering their likely questions.
- **“How to...keep your effort alive”** – To hold an official's attention, be vigilant about following up with calls, emails or visits. Ask others with similar issues to do the same.

“The best way – indeed, the only way – to develop savvy and self-assurance in lobbying is to do it.”

As you set out to do your own lobbying, don't allow your target to make excuses or to put you off by continually promising to “look into” your issue or by “playing dumb.” However, some reasons for delayed action are valid, such as a pending newspaper story or a law that's due to expire. Don't waste money hiring consultants who offer inflated promises of favorable results, and don't buy directories that just reprint information you can find yourself.

About the Author

Amy Handlin has worked in state and local government for more than two decades. She is deputy minority leader in the New Jersey General Assembly and an

associate professor of marketing at Monmouth University. She also wrote *Whatever Happened to the Year of the Woman? Why Women Still Aren't Making It to the Top in Politics*.
