HOW TO LOBBY

What is lobbying?
For many non-profit organisations, "lobbying" has negative connotations or provokes anxiety. Some people are afraid to reach out to decision-makers because they seem distant, and sometimes organisations avoid lobbying altogether. Lobbying simply means encouraging the adoption, defeat, or modification of laws or policies – at the local, national or even international level. Lobbying involves giving views and information to decision-makers in order to influence them toward the action you want, which means contacting officials who make the laws and policies, communicating desires and opinions, challenging the arguments of opponents, and demonstrating wide support for an issue.

Who can lobby?
Anyone can lobby. You don't have to be a representative of a specific organisation. Even a citizen acting out of personal interest can call, write, or meet with decision-makers to give views and information on a particular issue or law. Remember however that certain non-governmental organisations are not permitted to lobby, so you must first check the particular position with your board or funding bodies. Even if your organisation is not permitted to "lobby", you may be able to "attempt to influence" law-makers – which often involves similar activities.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."
Margaret Mead
How to start?

- Focus on one issue: choose one specific issue of interest to you and focus your lobbying efforts on that issue.
- Research & support your issue. It is not enough to have strong views on a subject; you must support your views with accurate, up-to-date information from respected sources (publications, studies, statistics, case studies & witnessing, best models etc.). Be absolutely accurate. Prepare the facts about the impact of the problems you’re discussing.
- Define and articulate what you want, including specific recommendations for change or action. Provide exact language for any proposals you want a decision-maker to support. Provide alternative recommendations, as a basis for negotiation. Obtain outside help from experts if necessary (lawyers / doctors / specialist groups)
- Prepare a short oral presentation (5-10 minutes). Be ready to present clearly and in a logical order. Remember: decision-makers may have no detailed knowledge of your issue.
- Let the truth speak for itself. Don’t exaggerate problems.
- Create a clear strategy for approaches. Who: individual / national or regional group / delegation / minister or ministry? How: written / personal / telephone / formal / informal / group meetings / individual meetings? Where: local / national / regional / international?
- Know the decision-making processes that apply – this might be a local council, or a national parliament, or an international body. This will help you to track the progress of bills, to make sure lobbying efforts coincide with key points in the process, and to avoid wasting time and energy on issues that are “dead”.
- Know the decision-makers and identify who you want to approach. Find out who will help you or oppose you by researching the media, or asking organisations and other individuals. Don’t focus on a single target.
- As well as concentrating on those who oppose you, make sure you also approach decision-makers who support your position, as decision-makers also lobby each other.
- Find out each decision-maker’s position on the issue you are concerned about. If you aren’t sure, research the press or other media, ask community groups or other interested organisations.
- Be up-to-date regarding the issues that you are trying to influence, and keep track of proposed legislation / votes / meetings that will affect your issues. An e-mail alert service can help.
- Know when to lobby. Decision-making processes often continue throughout the year. Timing your lobbying efforts to have the greatest impact is important, particularly if you have limited time and resources. Knowing deadlines in advance gives you time to contact decision-makers before actions are taken.
- Keep track of informal decision-making processes. Much of the formal decision-making takes place in committees or other informal meetings. You need to know when such meetings will take place and what will be discussed. Many informal meetings are open to the public, and can an excellent opportunity for you to present your views and information to decision-makers, but remember there are often procedural rules for making presentations.
- Follow formal processes directly. If an informal meeting approves a decision, it still may have difficulties. An issue you support may be amended during formal proceedings, so it’s important to follow all formal processes in person, and be prepared to intervene where possible.
- Discover as much as you can about the decision-makers you intend to approach. Be aware of decision-makers’ existing alliances and partnerships, what particular interest groups influence them, their weaknesses and their opponents. Research their voting records, and their past positions, and remember to congratulate them for any efforts they have already made in support of your cause, as some decision-makers often have the incorrect assumption that civil society representatives and NGOs are only negative in their approach.

Contacting law-makers

When you are ready to enter the most important stage of lobbying – contacting decision-makers – there are three options: talking in person, calling on the telephone, or writing. All three can be effective. The method or methods you choose will depend on the time and resources you have available.

1. Face-to-face
Face-to-face visits are probably the most effective form of lobbying. However, gaining access to decision-makers can be difficult. Make an appointment where possible, but even without an appointment, you may still be able to meet with decision-makers at key meetings or formal sessions. You can use this opportunity to
introduce yourself to decision-makers and ask if they have a few minutes to talk to you. Whenever you meet in person:

- Be on time!
- Identify yourself, the organisation you represent and the issue you’re interested in, and briefly explain your position. Be friendly and well prepared.
- Thank him or her for taking the time to see you. Stay polite and never make threats.
- Don’t be disappointed if your appointment is with another person. Decision-makers are often busy and staff members will pass on the information they receive to their superiors. By developing a good relationship with a staff member, you can open an important “line of communication” to that office.
- Present a clear message. If you are with a number of fellow lobbyists, choose one person to speak for your group. Get your point across in the fewest possible words.
- Tell the decision-maker what action you’d like taken and why.
- State the effects you think your position will have and why the decision-maker should support your position.
- Use facts to support your arguments and leave supporting documents whenever possible.
- Be prepared for questions or challenges. If you don’t know the answer to a question, don’t be afraid to admit it. Say you will research the matter and report back.
- Be prepared to negotiate or compromise, where possible.
- Be prepared for rejection. If you efforts are rejected, try dividing the issue into sub-issues and approach decision-makers with these different components. Establish clearly who accepts what issues, and be prepared to change your objectives or to go a step higher or lower within a decision-making hierarchy.
- Be a good listener. Give the decision-maker or staff member a chance to express his/her point of view.
- Give special recognition to decision-makers who you know are on your side. Ask them for advice and help in reaching other decision-makers, and suggestions for ways to communicate the issue to their colleagues.
- Establish that they understand clearly your objectives.
- Ask for firm commitments for action from decision-makers: What will they do? When?
- If a decision-maker or staff member expresses opposition to your viewpoint, stay friendly so you will have access to them in the future.

2. Telephone
When time is limited or travel impractical, you may need to contact legislators by telephone. Many of the points referred to above in relation to meetings apply here, but when contacting a decision-maker by telephone, it’s especially important to be brief, polite, and well prepared. The legislator may not have much time to talk, and your call will likely be one of many the legislator receives that day. State your issue in a way that leaves a positive impression.

3. Letters
- If you have only a minimum of time and resources available for lobbying, writing letters may be the only practical way for you to contact legislators. Lobbying by mail can be effective, as it allows you to organise your views and information in a form that legislators can keep and refer to later.
- Be concise and clear. State the specific issue you are concerned about, why you support or oppose it, and what action you would like the decision-maker to take. Don't include unnecessary or unrelated information. Be polite. Introduce yourself, present your arguments in a respectful manner, and thank the decision-maker for his or her time. Include your return address and telephone number so that s/he can respond to your letter. E-mail or fax is nearly as effective as ordinary mail and more effective than a phone call.
- Avoid petitions because decision-makers understand how easy it is for people to sign them without really understanding the issues.

**Working through a lobby group**
Whatever the issue you’re lobbying, you are probably not alone. If you look, you will find other individuals and groups who share your position and may be able to help you in your lobbying efforts.
A very effective method of lobbying is through collective action – that is, to create a network, coalition, or caucus, and work through this group. This will allow you to share information and expertise, and will provide moral and practical strength.

- Build a cross-sectional support network – that is, look at other groups that may not be specifically concerned with your issue, but whose mandate may support it. This allows you to broaden your contacts and influence.
- Formalise your group – give it a name (caucus / collective / network etc.) and have an established contact person.
- Establish agreement regarding your position and recommendations.
- Establish effective ways of group communication (e-mail or other distribution lists, list-serves, web-page etc.)
- Decide which members of your group will undertake lobbying, and divide lobbying according to their capabilities (for example: language / culture / national / region / expertise / specific contacts & experience).
- Keep track of all lobbying activity & distribute up-dates to members of the group. Who is doing what? When were certain actions taken? How was it done? What were the results? What are the next steps to be taken?

**Follow-up**

- Send a thank-you letter after any visit or telephone contact. Restate your case briefly and provide any information you may have promised during your meeting. This gives you a second chance to make your point.
- Make sure decision-makers are keeping to any commitments they have made.
- If you have been unable to obtain commitment or support, follow-up later – policies and personalities can change!
- Make sure you have long-term follow-up – are laws / policies / commitments being properly implemented? Remember there is a difference between policy and practice!
- Analyse your lobbying efforts - your successes, your disappointments and what you have learnt. Share your findings with members of your group and with others.

**Remember!**

- Decision-makers and elected officials do pay attention to the opinions of those who elect them. They need you too!
- Everyone knows somebody. Ask around for ideas. When you find someone to help, ask him or her to recommend others.
- Use the media. Even at a small council meeting will be members of the local press, and any issues you raise can lead to press coverage. If you have a favourable result or decision, inform your local or national media.
- The key to successful lobbying is "building a wave". Use each little victory as ammunition for the next battle. Build layers of support and create a positive domino effect.
- Even if you don't achieve your goals, lobbying gives you the satisfaction of putting your beliefs into action and playing an important role in the decision-making process.
- You will need courage, persistence & faith – but you do have the power to change!

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