

Successful Advocacy

is an Art

A lawmaker's chief concern is getting elected, or re-elected. He or she needs our help to do so. We need their help to achieve our legislative and regulatory agenda.

Successful citizen advocacy is possible when the nature of this relationship is fully understood.

If you invest even a little bit of time just a few times each year in contacting your legislators, you're more politically active than 95 percent of the citizenry. Following are some "do's" and "don'ts" to consider when interacting with elected public officials.

Ten "DO's" Of Successful Advocacy

- 1) Remember: Time is precious. All communication with a legislator, or their staff, should be short and to the point.
- 2) When contacting a legislator about a piece of legislation:
 - Include the bill number, and if you know it, the name of the sponsor.
 - Always include your name, address, email address, as well as home and office telephone numbers on your correspondence. It helps them to know when you're a constituent or that you represent credit union members from the district—use your project zip code data.
 - Explain in simple terms the logic behind your position. The most effective description will detail how the legislation will affect the state's budget, jobs, and people in the legislator's district.
 - Sometimes, it's helpful to mention that people in your organization share your position (a subtle way of reminding them you bring a lot of voters to the table).
 - Take advantage of credit unions' strength in numbers. This is true for telephone calls, snail mail, email, office visits, and even financial support. HR 1151 taught us that, some times, even the volume of communications they receive is incredibly important.
 - You have every right to ask how a legislator will vote on an issue and expect a response.
 - Be patient – An issue will often percolate for weeks before being heard in a committee. But, if you don't hear something in a timely fashion, you should follow up after a reasonable interval.
- 3) When visiting a legislator's office, it's always good to have something to leave behind. It can be a position paper explaining your legislation, a bumper sticker, a button, or anything that makes your visit stand out from the hundreds of people they see each day.
- 4) Treat a legislator's staff as well as you would treat the legislator. Building a relationship with the staffer is almost as important as with the legislator. The staffer usually prepares a briefing package, which usually includes a summary of the issue, a list of proponents/opponents, and a recommendation as to how the legislator should vote.
- 5) Write a thank you note to follow up when meeting with the legislator or staff. Little things do count.
- 6) When appropriate, use the media (guest editorials, letters to the editor, news stories, etc.) to help create

public support. Legislators always want to know what “people in the district want” and often look to the media for such information.

7) Invite your legislator and their staffers to your credit union. You’ll put a personal face on the issue you’re discussing and, if you tell the credit union story well, might even gain a new member for your credit union. Include your legislator(s) on your credit union’s mailing list for newsletters and other publications.

8) Understand that sometimes you and the legislator will have to compromise on an issue. Realistically assess what you can achieve now, and work on the rest later. Be a graceful winner and a good loser. Your adversary on this issue might be your ally on another.

9) Support CUPAC and CULAC. Our best friends can’t support us if they aren’t elected to office.

10) Remember – We, and the legislature, need one another.

Ten Things A Successful Advocate Does NOT Do:

1) ...ever lie. It’s perfectly acceptable to say you don’t know, and then get a legislator/staffer the answer. Anything less than the truth only serves to damage your credibility. And, when the chips are down, credibility is the only thing we have going for us.

2) ...use jargon. Technical terms are usually not understood. Remember, you aren’t speaking to colleagues in your office. Few legislators know what the acronym NCUA stands for.

3) ...confuse the issues. Two or three topics are about all you should cover in one meeting.

4) ...use a form letter when writing them. Form letters are rarely taken seriously.

5) ...contact a legislator, and then fail to follow up. Persistence pays off.

6) ...say that you’re contacting a legislator because someone told you to. Legislators respond to people who vote, not organizations that orchestrate campaigns.

7) ...make a campaign contribution at the same time as you are asking for support on an issue.

8) ...fail to visit with your legislator in the district. Visiting your legislator on their, and your, home turf can make issues more personal for the legislator and his constituents. Remember the old adage “all politics are local.”

9) ...act as though your legislator is royalty. While they may be King of the Hill at the Capitol; at home, they are just regular folks.

10) ...ever forget that you and your legislator need one another.