

Do's and Don'ts of Advocacy

Know your representative: get to know the representative or senator from your district on a personal basis. Get close enough to your representative so that he or she knows your name, who you are and what organization you are with.

Know about your representative: Learn enough about your representative so that you don't commit a faux pas that will damage your cause. For example, don't rail against pork-barrel politics when you are there trying to bring home a little bacon of your own. It is not likely that the representative will share all of your political views. However, the only voting record that counts is the one they will make on the issue you are pressing.

Have a focused and concise message: representatives have even less disposable time than you do, so don't overburden them with detail and don't protract the session. There may be no points to be gained by finishing on schedule, but there are definitely points to be lost by not finishing in the time you've been allotted.

Get to know the representative's staff: all representatives need help in dealing with a vast panoply of problems. It is the representative's staff that supply that help. Educating the staff may be as significant as educating the representative, and staffers can usually give you more time than the representative can.

Don't limit visitations to crisis situations: make sure that some of your visits are just courtesy calls. Visit often for a "hi" and a handshake. How are you doing today? Is there anything you need from us today?

Don't commit effrontery toward someone else's issue: be positive about your own shtick, and do not attack another program gratuitously. Representatives have to make choices, but they won't appreciate your meddling in other's issues.

Visit the representative in the district: when they are not in the capital working, representatives are in their district politicking, and there are ways of showing them at home that there are real votes involved in your issues. Also consider volunteering a few hours of your time (or a relative's time) for envelope-stuffing and making phone calls.

Get to know who the key representatives are: know who they are in terms of major committee assignments and make alliances with others in your field who are in the districts served by these key representatives.

Accept a turn-down or set-back graciously: recognize that when the representative votes contrary to your urging, it won't be because they are ignorant or uninformed. Perhaps their philosophical priorities are different from yours, and, of course, it may be that political considerations dictate a certain vote.

Do not attempt to do your lobbying like a lobbyist: your competitors for the representative's attention and vote are professionals with big dollars at their disposal. Therefore you should forget about inviting a representative to dinner -- or any other blandishments. Just know your facts. Be as straight as you know how to be in making your case, and don't underestimate what the representative may already know about your problem.