Handout 13: Lobbying Politicians

Lobbying is the process of influencing people to pursue an outcome, which is in the interests of the group/community.

The word lobbyist derives from a lobby, the public area used for interviews between Members of the House of Commons and their constituents or others. To lobby originally meant to seek to influence MPs to get a bill through Parliament. (Bleedin' Heart Media: Don't Let Australia Become the Homeless Country).

Some Lobbying Tips

- Before you make any meetings or appointments work out if your problem is a state/territory or a federal government issues.

- Try to arrange a meeting with an MP or Minister on the home ground of their electoral office. It’s easier and cheaper than going to Canberra and they are more likely to be relaxed and have time to listen to you.

- Fax or send a brief appointment letter. Offer a range of meeting times and dates as politicians have busy schedules. If you are going to meet at Parliament, it’s important to pick the correct time for a meeting. The best time to see a Minister is early in the sitting period (that is when Parliament is actually in progress) and early in the morning. At the end of the sitting periods and later in the day politicians can be frantic trying to get last minute business sorted out. Avoid meeting an MP immediately before or after Question Time as their attention will probably not be on your case.

- If you have to see department heads, committees, parliamentary secretaries or other MPs, try and arrange meetings on the same day. Remember to leave enough time between each meeting as bureaucrats and politicians are often late. Use the Minister’s staff to guide you around Parliament House.

- Research your issue before your meeting and any background information about the Minister’s portfolio that helps you understand theirs or her concerns.

- Try to identify a media angle to give the Minister the opportunity to exploit your issue. Good news is usually preferred, but something that is harmful to the Opposition is also welcomed. If you have some dirt on the government, then you should lobby the Opposition.

- Understand the parliamentary and government department process and policy making and options available to Ministers.

- If you are going to bag a Minister’s department, it’s not a good idea to have someone from the department there. However, you should inform the Minister’s advisers before the meeting.
• KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid). This approach should apply to your presentation. It should be easy to understand, as brief as possible.

• You should have the main points on a one-page handout so people in the meeting can follow your arguments and are left with the summary of your case. Other supporting documents should also be left behind in a briefing folder for the Minister and their staff.

• Ministers are usually well briefed by their staff, so don’t try bluffing them.

• Follow up your meeting with a letter, which restates the agreed positions or outcomes from your meeting.

• Keep in contact with the Minister’s staff. They’ve usually been selected because the Minister trusts them.

• Don’t forget the Minister usually has different staff in their own electoral offices. Treat them with the same respect as their Canberra staff.

• Carefully build support among other departments and MPs and parliamentary secretaries to help promote your case.

How to be a Successful Lobbyist

Lobbyist Stephen Woodward makes his living from getting the message of this social issue or that of his client through to the decision makers.

Woodward, who works mainly in the area of Government, is a former director of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) and recently returned to Sydney and is now the chief executive officer of the Australian Republican Movement (ARM).

He says: “Lobbyists usually seek a change to a circumstance or condition, such as a law, rule of regulation, or try to stop change --- that is, maintaining the status quo.

Whatever his or her objective, Woodward says the following points are worth keeping in mind:

• Define your objectives precisely --- and decide before the heat of the debate what compromises you are prepared to make.

• Identify who supports your objective within the Parliament, the media and the community and prepare to mobilise your supporters. For example, it’s vital to have phone, fax and mailing lists researched, updated and checked for accuracy: you get no points for writing to the new Member for Woolloomooloo, addressing it to the former Member who was defeated at a previous election or sending a media release to identify who has the ability to ensure that the objective is delivered and how to influence them.
• Maintain your honesty, credibility, humour and equilibrium throughout the campaign. Extreme radicalism rarely succeeds.

• Unless you are in the business of producing miracles, ensure that your movement has sufficient resources (financial and human) to deliver the objective.

• Research your arguments and those of your opponents, thoroughly. Deliver your messages, particularly to politicians and the media, concisely and confidently.

• Be realistic at all times. Don’t try to please all of the people all of the time.

• Try to visit MPs or arrange other influential people to visit. Arrange for your supporters to write (in their own words, however sophisticated or simple: it is genuineness that is important) but face to face meetings are better.

• If you can’t do the job properly yourself, engage someone who can --- otherwise you will do your issues a disservice.

**Effective Lobbying and Opposition Management**

1. Define the issue and the outcome/s required.
2. Identify all players/stakeholders:
   - Obvious supporters and those who you think will be sympathetic to the issue
   - Establish a power base through networking, collaborative partnerships.
3. Identify those who are valuable sources of information, contacts with community members, can provide expert advice.
4. Work out ways of involving them thus enabling a sense of ownership.
5. Identify your opponents – who will work against you? What is their interest in the matter? What can you do to neutralise them? How will you respond to their position?
6. Attempt to diminish or dilute their position or influence by presenting a more informed case and by generating sympathy or support for your case.
7. Who makes the decisions? Public servants, policy makers, political advisers, politicians.
8. Establish time frames that are workable yet meet media/submission deadlines.
9. Ensure your information is well –researched and is supported by evidence as opposed to “hear say” and anecdotal information alone.

Commence the lobbying process with smaller issues and activities and building up to the main game. This process will enable you to establish “runs on the board”, i.e. credibility and further enhance your position to progress the issue. Make sure that those who are lobbying are aware of your power base and they will be able to make informed decisions on the impact on them in the event they are planning to refuse your request.