

Influence

The Business of Lobbying

influence.biz

A LEGAL TIMES PUBLICATION

MAY 14, 2003

Lobby Ink

by AMY SHOWALTER AND KELTON RHOADS

Tending to Grass Roots

Advocacy has to be customized. One size doesn't fit all.

Amy Showalter is a grass-roots and PAC consultant and founder of the Showalter Group in Cincinnati. She has done work for Southwest Airlines, the International Dairy Foods Association, and the American Heart Association, among others. Kelton Rhoads is a Los Angeles-based consultant with the firm.

We have seen insurance and financial experts who are members of the Million-Dollar Roundtable become mute before their members of Congress. We've witnessed world-class scientists go full-speed sideways into legislator meetings and come out defeated.

The reason is not that they can't handle the pressure—they are among the most capable people in their chosen profession. Rather, it's because they've been ill served by tired, "one size fits all" grass-roots techniques for hitting Capitol Hill. The fact is, each trade association or corporation requires a different advocacy approach based on its own profile.

When a client from a hospitality-related industry hired us to prep their rank-and-file members for Hill visits, they told us that people in the industry were chemically incapable of asking for their legislator's vote. The reason for their reticence was their calling: Hospitality people are conflict-averse. Doctors, on the other hand, assume a great deal of authority every day. It's uncommon for anyone to challenge their directives.

As a result, it is a bad idea to approach a group of medical professionals the same way you might chemists, public health advocates, or financial planners. The callings are too diverse to pull something off the shelf. To maximize clients' impact, you must build communications and influence skills from their innate strengths.

There are scores of tools in the influence toolbox, and the savvy grass-roots consultant knows how to use the right tool for each client and situation. The best tools include applying creative techniques for building trust, doing the legwork back home to create proximity to lawmakers, and using personal narratives to drive points home.

We'll never forget the comment of a hand surgeon who said he had attended numerous Capitol Hill events and found them to be a waste of time. "I had to talk to a young guy with slicked-back hair who didn't know anything about the issue," he said. "I don't know if I'll participate again."

Clearly, having an older, more experienced, and more successful person trying to persuade a young staffer can be a recipe for disaster. Many of the necessary ingredients—trust, similarity, just liking a person—are missing. To overcome these hurdles, the advocate should find out what the staffer and client have in common. Where is the staffer from? Is this his or her first job out of college? What college? We know of advocates who break through this way and are able to meet with legislators who were previously "unavailable."

A significant amount of research shows that building rapport before negotiating increases the likelihood of an agreement. If it works for negotiators, we can apply it to grass-roots lobbying efforts.

Another key to making Washington outsiders effective when they are in town is getting beyond fly-ins and fund-raisers and creating opportunities for face-to-face contact before and after the Hill visits. Examples included serving on a nonprofit board in the lawmaker's district; introducing the lawmaker or staffers to community and opinion leaders; arranging for the lawmaker or staff to speak at community group meetings; working on the campaign; and asking them to meet with employees or professional association members when they are in the district.

Finally, find the right language that will connect constituents with lawmakers. Telling a story is powerful, in part because it is a "stealth" tactic for persuading others. Stories engage listeners and get them on your side without strong-arm tactics. This is exactly what we taught the hospitality industry people. Naturally nonconfrontational, they were both more comfortable and more effective advocates when telling their personal stories rather than reciting facts and statistics.

Many of the trade groups and corporations that want to make a difference in Washington are high-altitude people. They are competent at brokering the deal, making the sale, and persuading recalcitrant subordinates. We are wasting their strengths, and hampering our legislative agendas, when we don't truly equip them to do the same when they reach the Capitol.

"Lobby Ink" shares this space with three other features: "Tradewinds," Q&A's with trade association officials; "Hill Profile," which looks at key Hill staffers; and "In Focus," profiles of lobby shops.