

NINE TIPS FOR THE EFFECTIVE INFLUENCING OF GOVERNMENT



Whether you call it public affairs, advocacy or just plain lobbying, the reality is that many in business regard the whole process as a bit of a dark art. We all see the ads that industry groups run. How many industry groups and peak bodies are running campaigns during this election? How many peak bodies inhabit Canberra, AKA the “Home of the Rent-seeker”? It’s no different at a state level.

But truth be known it’s fundamental to a healthy democracy. And because we live in a democracy we should never forget that politics by definition is a contest of ideas and a contest of communication and persuasion. Just ask Boris (maybe not David this week).

Below I have noted nine simple points that may help you and your industry, organisation or cause to be more successful in influencing government and I’d welcome your feedback, experience and input:

- 1. Have an objective.** Influencing government is like any other persuasive communications program in that to design and run a program, you need an objective. It might be a small objective - to get your local member to act on something small, to get something on the record in Hansard or to have legislation amended in a technical or relatively small way. To get more funding for your charitable cause. Alternatively, it might be substantial - to have a policy profoundly altered or dumped (think Mining Tax), or to substantially amend legislation or regulation. You might even be in a profound constitutional fight (e.g. Republicans v Monarchists, Brexit v Remain, Second Amendment v Gun Reform).
- 2. Have a strategy.** Consider the landscape and any competitive activity carefully. Do you first need to shift public opinion? Can you work on both legislators and their constituents and your stakeholders simultaneously, or in which order do you need to operate? Map the stakeholders, map who is on-side, who is undecided and who is rusted-on against you. What are your messages and to whom? Do you have the budget to “go big” with advertising, launches, events etc? Who are your spokespeople?
- 3. Have inside intelligence.** A good public affairs practitioner should either have access to a close ally in the party room/s or have an associate that does. Some practitioners and firms are partisan; other firms are bipartisan and have access across the House. In any regard, you need to build a relationship with some MPs who can help tell you which way the wind is blowing on your matter. This will help guide your strategy and your tactics. If you have the budget and public opinion is important, then poll your position regularly.
- 4. Don’t ignore the backbench.** The party room will thrash out many policies of importance. Make sure you have plenty of support in that forum. Perhaps you can identify someone who wants to be a Minister and provide them with a platform to raise their profile.

5. **Identify influencers and build party-room beachheads.** Further on the backbench note, it is important to think in blocks given blocks equal numbers and share of voice in the party room. Which like-minded MPs can you group together and form blocks of allies? Who are the opinion or faction leaders that you need to help you bring them and their followers onside? Be direct, and be honest. Ask them to bring their supporters with them. Tell them why your position should be their position. Sometimes you might have to spell it out!
6. **Have a carrot *and* a stick.** Make it clear you are prepared to make a contest of this if you have to. Be prepared to use alternate voices to raise the volume of the debate and hold the government accountable. If you think you are right, and they are wrong, third party advocacy is more potent than self-interested industry groups. Alternatively, don't forget that politicians like solutions. If the issue you are tackling is a problem for government and you can contribute to solving it with alternative policy ideas then pitch it that way.
7. **Use the opposition and crossbenchers.** This is where having a bipartisan firm or practitioner is worth its weight in gold. Again, stemming from point six, to have both a carrot and a stick you need to be able to work with the opposition, minor parties and the crossbench. At the other end of the spectrum, remember as well that a lot of the business government is done away from the theatre of Parliament and media and is often constructive and cooperative. Where you can work cooperatively and provide knowledge and assistance, then do so. Add value, make yourself useful.
8. **Understand parliamentary process; understand the way Committees and Inquiries work.** This should speak for itself. You need to know the rules of the game to participate effectively.
9. **Being persuasive doesn't mean lying, being unethical or doing something illegal.** Lobbying is persuasive communication; its principles are the same essentially as advertising consumer products, public safety messages or personal sales. You establish a clear position, craft your core messages and arguments and pitch hard – i.e. tell the truth and tell it well. Ethics aside, it's the fastest ticket to persona non grata in government you can buy. We have all seen in recent times that the various state corruption watchdogs have long tentacles and sharp teeth.

Finally, it goes without saying that you need to be persistent. The nature of government is different to the world of business. Perhaps the last word is best left to Sir Humphrey:

“if you ask me for a straight answer, then I shall say that, as far as we can see, looking at it by and large, taking one thing with another in terms of the average of departments, then in the final analysis it is probably true to say, that at the end of the day, in general terms, you would probably find that, not to put too fine a point on it, there probably wasn't very much in it one way or the other. As far as one can see, at this stage.”

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