

Five Rules for Effective Advocacy Encounters

Advocacy can be very complicated, and some of what professional advocates do requires a lot of experience and sophistication. However, there are some basic rules that anyone can follow, and everyone -- including the least experienced -- can learn to be effective.

Rule # 1: Advocacy just means “Being Engaged”

Advocacy can include activities like organizing a mass demonstration on the Capitol steps, sponsoring legislation, or writing letters to the editor; but the most basic form of advocacy is just **“Being Engaged.”** Simply by participating in the political process, you will bring attention and awareness to your cause or priority. You do not need to orchestrate large events, or sponsor legislation in order to be effective. By taking the time to meet with your local legislator, write a letter on behalf of your priorities, or placing a call to a legislator’s office, you will bring attention to your cause and increase the likelihood that your legislator will support your position. The only thing you CAN’T do is stay silent. Write. Call. Visit. Do whatever works best for you.

Rule # 2: Advocacy can occur outside the Capitol

It is essential to let your elected officials, and their staff, know how you feel and the reasoning behind your position. However, one lone voice may not result in the adoption of your position. Many times, in order to affect change, you need to demonstrate that a significant number of a legislator’s constituents feel as you do -- and then let the legislator know it! Effective advocacy includes informing other individuals as well as our elected officials. The most effective advocacy often takes the form of having a conversation with a friend. “Did you hear what they’re proposing to do down at the Capitol? It’s going to affect every family in this state and I’ll bet most people don’t even know about it yet....” By engaging in conversations at the grocery store, a coffee shop, or at a public library you can mobilize community members and gain additional support for your cause.

Rule # 3: Keep your audience in mind

It is important to remember that not all legislators think the same way or support the same concepts. In order to maximize you advocacy encounter, it is good to have some general background information on whom you will be meeting with. Is the legislator a Democrat or Republican? Are they from Northern California or Southern California? Have they supported your cause in the past?

Being able to answer a few simple questions, and then modifying your encounter based on the information you have, is key to maximizing your advocacy efforts. For example, if a legislator has a history of fiscal conservatism, you may wish to speak about the cost-savings aspects of your cause; whereas if the legislator was a community activist, you may want to speak about the local community support for your cause. Legislators usually want to help, so make sure you choose an approach that allows them to do so.

Rule # 4: Be sure THEY hear YOU.

The first three rules are easy; this one is a bit tricky. That's partly because elected officials have a lot more experience with talking rather than listening. If given the chance, many legislators will dominate a conversation. While it is important to keep a legislator engaged in conversation, remember that the purpose of the meeting is for them to listen to you. The political process and the State Capitol setting can be intimidating, but here are three good techniques to keep you comfortable and talking about your priorities:

- **Bring something with you that *you* have to explain.** Bring a one-page fact sheet or a photo that you can explain to the legislator, this can often ensure that you will be the one talking and they will be the one learning.
- **Memorize an outline of a speech.** This doesn't have to be very long, just a minute or two is often sufficient to start the conversation. It should include: your name; where you live; any organization or coalition that you represent or are affiliated with; what you're there to talk about; and, what you want them to do ("I want you to vote FOR....."). If you have time, go into more detail –e.g., how the Legislator's District is/will be affected by the issue or bill.
- **Speak in your own words.** Legislators are people, so talk to them the way you would anyone else. Let the legislator know who you are, what you do, and how their actions affect your life. You will find that a personal story and genuine interaction will go a long way in getting your legislator to support your cause.

Rule # 5: Establish as many relationships as possible

Some people will tell you not to worry about the legislators who are your "friends," and likewise not to waste time on legislators that you know oppose your cause; instead, just concentrate on the "swing" votes. False.

First, our "friends" need to hear from us. They need to hear us say "thank you," and they need to hear our newest, best information and arguments. They need to be reminded of why they support us and we need to know if there is any way in which we can help them. Second, in politics it is very difficult to predict how someone is going to vote; few votes are certain in advance, so we need to make sure that our "friends" have all the information they need to refute any opposition.

Third, the surest rule of politics is that today's opponent is tomorrow's potential ally -- and vice-versa. Don't ever write anyone off because there is a good chance that your interests will align at some point in the future. As an advocate for your cause, you can't afford to alienate anyone, as it may prove to be a disservice to the cause down the road. It is important to remember that people can respectfully disagree on one issue and later become strong allies on another.