

# Successful State-Level Government Affairs

By Crystal Young-Otterstrom



Running successful government affairs at the state level brings its own special challenges. The legislative sessions are short, you have a small number of people to lobby, and in the vast majority of states the legislature is firmly in one party's control.

My years of experience have taught me a lot of techniques for promoting the issues that my organization cares about. I'm happy to share some of this here.

## **Build strong, personal relationships**

Relationships are vital for politicians. This should come as no surprise. That's how they get elected. They build a coalition of support all across their districts in order to get endorsements and mobilize get-out-the-vote efforts. They create rapport with potential voters. They have to meet huge numbers of people in order to raise funds.

Accordingly, relationships are vital for lobbyists. It's much easier to ask for something (and to get it) when you have a personal relationship with the person you're asking.

Elected officials want to know you. They need to be sure that you know your issue inside and out, that you understand the legislative process, and that you want to get things done just as much as they do.

They use what they know about you to weigh whether they will listen to your suggestions or not. Remember that plenty of other people are also asking them to vote a certain way or adjust a bill's language. How do they decide whose advice to take? Partly by knowing the messengers.

If you take the time to build these relationships, the subsequent political goodwill will make a big difference in your lobbying efforts. Once you have a reputation as a reasonable person who believes in something strongly and has the support to back it up, doors open for you. People are willing to listen to what you have to say.

With close relationships, even political affiliation becomes less important. I'm a known Democrat in a very red state, but I'm successful at my work because I've put in the time to develop close, lasting relationships with our elected leaders. Part of the reason this works is that state legislators tend to be pragmatic. They just want to get the work done. They're willing to work with anyone who is reasonable and knowledgeable.

## Build relationships in the off season

During a legislative session, you have work to get done. At this point, your relationships with elected officials should already be strong.

How do you make and strengthen the relationships? Meet with people when the legislature is not in session.

This really, really works. For a variety of reasons. For starters, you're actually just meeting them. If every conversation is you asking for something, that's not a relationship. Legislators have told me that they are always concerned about the people who seem to be just asking machines. But if they know that you're a real person, someone who's genuinely concerned about the issues, this makes a big difference in their willingness to hear you out when you do come with an ask.



**So get to know them.** Don't always be in lobby mode. Converse. Be social.

Go to their events. Go to other events that they attend. Make a point of talking to them.

Go to their fundraisers if you have a 501 (c) (4) or PAC. If you don't have one, get one. It makes a world of difference. You don't have to contribute very much to be appreciated. The value isn't the donation. It's the fact that you're there and you're not lobbying. You're just being present.

Go out into their districts and meet them there. Ask about their work. Ask about what matters to them. Make a small road trip out of it.

I guarantee that meeting with legislators in the off season will pay dividends to your ability to build stronger relationships with them.

Of course, also send some emails from time to time during the off season. Just keep your messages and issues present in their minds. They'll remember those emails when you meet them, for sure.

Then, in the fall, when you need to start having real meetings and talk about upcoming legislation, you'll get those meetings. You won't be just a face walking in the door with statistics and impact statements and talking points. You'll be a real person who they know and remember.

## Be direct. Be relevant

This ought to go without saying, but don't waste anyone's time. If you use valuable meetings or emails talking about things a given legislator has no control over or isn't related to the bill under consideration, they'll write you off in a hot minute.



### Here's a cautionary example

We had a tax bill up for consideration, and another organization put together a lengthy letter for the committee. They went into great detail about impacts and arguments for a number of things. The problem was that it was not directly related to that specific tax bill. The committee members dutifully read it all, and they were not at all happy to learn that the organization had just wasted their time. Their opinion of this organization fell dramatically, and it took time to fix the reputational damage.

Every elected official has limited time resources, but it is especially true in the states. The sessions are so short (40-120 days on average), and they all want to get things done in that small window of time. They're also only part-time. The rest of the year they have other things to do. So every email, every phone call, every meeting must be on-message and relevant to them.

## Recognize your champions

This can sound corny, but elected officials love public recognition of any kind. They absolutely love it.



### Give awards - but be creative

Many organizations give awards at the end of a legislative session. You base this on the members' voting records. Everyone who gets an A gets an award.

This is great, but most of the awards are the same boring plaques. Mix it up and give them something memorable. Something clearly connected to you and your issues.

For example, we represent the arts and humanities. So we recently commissioned an original artwork. We printed copies and the artist hand lettered each one to the award recipients. This was a huge success. Legislators told me things like "I will actually keep this one." There's an award hanging in the Speaker's office right now.



### Thank them in social media

This is great because it's even more public than the physical awards.

Go to the trouble of creating a separate post for your social media feeds for each legislator whose voting record earned them an A from your organization. Add an image with their photo and something nice (maybe their A rating). Tag them in the post.

They love that kind of extra, personalized attention. They usually share the post on their own social media feeds, which is additional exposure for you.

## Get your message right

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### Tailor your words to your audience

Think about the words you use carefully. Listen to them through a partisan filter. For example, in arts education we often talk about “equitable access”. If you’re talking to a Republican official, that could sound like a bunch of liberal babble-speech. You won’t make any headway, even though this Republican you’re speaking to probably believes in a fundamental idea of fairness, which is really similar to what you mean.

Your Republican representative probably campaigned on small government and low budgets. It’s also generally true that elected officials don’t want to spend zero dollars. They want to develop their state in a way that is good for the state. They do approve spending. But you have to approach it the right way. In our situation, we talk a lot about funding for the humanities and the arts at a “fiscally responsible” level. That’s something that everyone can get behind.

You just have to always keep in mind who you’re speaking with and what motivates them.

Another thing a lot of our officials don’t like are state mandates. They believe that local jurisdictions should have significant autonomy. So give a little. Support the inclusion of opt-out language in case a municipality doesn’t want to participate in the funding.



### Use both data and stories

When you're arguing your point, you absolutely need statistics. What's the economic impact? What's the social impact? Do your homework and be ready to deliver data as soon as you start speaking.

However, it's the stories you tell that really sell people on your arguments. If you can tell an emotionally charged story--something that transports the listener to a different time and place--that will be what seals the deal. That's what they'll remember. They'll keep your statistics, but they'll remember your story.

Here's a quick example of how I might combine both data and storytelling into a single statement.

"A few months ago, I had the opportunity to go to the Moab Music Festival. They take you out into the beautiful red rock of Canyonlands National Park and perform this amazing concert of classical music surrounded by the red rock. It's a surreal experience to hear music by Mozart or Bach or more modern composers like Messiaen in the midst of the gorgeous beauty of Utah. This is what brings people here. It's a sublime experience you remember for your entire life. And while I was there, guess what? I paid for a hotel. I rented a bike. I ate at restaurants. I contributed to Moab's economy. And I'm not the only one. [insert economic impact of the creative economy in Moab] And that's just one city. At the state level, humanities and arts employ 112,000 Utahns who bring in four and a half billion dollars in earnings on \$16 billion in sales. The creative industry generated \$325 million in sales tax to the state general fund. So it's good for the bottom line. But as we all know, the real value, the real impact comes from the kind of intangible, sublime experiences that stay with people for their whole lives. That is the core of humanities and arts."

## Use grassroots sparingly

You don't have to turn out the troops with a grassroots campaign for every single bill or appropriation. Just because it feels good, doesn't mean it's effective.

You have to be strategic about when you use them. Launching a major grassroots effort can sometimes be counter-productive.

Part of the issue is that so many advocates don't go to the trouble of customizing the messages that they send their representatives, and this results in a lot of messages that are verbatim. Quantity is a good thing, but if you're sending these verbatim messages too frequently, it can blunt the effectiveness.

Also, if you mobilize your entire base, they'll all be contacting their representatives. This is fine if every legislator is going to take part in a big vote, but it doesn't work at all if your bill is still in committee. It means that a lot of legislators will be contacted who can't do anything about your issue. You're just wasting their time (remember how much they hate that?).

This can really damage a legislator's opinion of the group who mobilized those advocates.

Everyone knows everyone in the state capital, and you don't want to be known for jamming up their voice mails and sending thousands of carbon-copied emails.

Of course, grassroots efforts can also be very effective. I've turned up the heat a couple of times, and officials have changed course based on the massive groundswell of support that we sent their way.

Just be judicious. Don't mobilize the troops for every single issue.



A full-throttle grassroots push can also show that you have some spine. Once you've demonstrated that it's in your toolkit, officials know that you could mobilize their constituents at a moment's notice. The knowledge that you could do it is often more powerful than launching that kind of campaign so frequently that you the legislators get turned off to you.

## Special tips for State Lobby Days

- Remember, you've got a really short window of time.
- Your advocates only get 5 minutes with their representatives.
- It's crunch time. They only get one shot and they have to make it count.
- Keep them on message. What's your appropriations message? What's your bill message?
- Make sure they're only talking about appropriations with people who have the power to make those appropriations.
- If it's a bill that's in committee, only mention it to the members who are actually on that committee.
- If it's passed the house, thank the house members for their support and push the senate to approve.

## Parting Thoughts

Plan ahead. You've only got that very short window and you need to make the most of it. What do you need to support or oppose? They'll be talking about it in the fall. That's your time to make sure it gets on the docket for the spring. If you don't work it in advance, it won't be taken up in that session.

Help out other organizations, even if their mission is only tangentially related to yours. If they ask for your support of an issue that you don't have a strong opinion on, but you can afford to sign your name onto it, do it. You never know when you may need their support as a coalition partner in the future.

Don't be afraid to have political opinions about issues not directly related to yours. Elected officials are political animals, and it can seem disingenuous if you are completely neutral on all issues except for one. You don't have to be completely neutral on all other issues. Be human. Be yourself. Be respectful, of course. You will find that this puts officials more at ease because they see you being genuine. That will only help solidify your relationship with them. If you're unsure of how important those relationships are, please see the entire first half of this article.



**Crystal Young-Otterstrom** is the Executive Director of Utah Cultural Alliance, the statewide advocacy voice for the arts, humanities, and cultural industries of Utah. She was named one of Utah Business Magazine's 40 under 40 in 2013.

Crystal spent eight years as a marketing, campaign, and event planning consultant at Brand.Pink and was the Audience Development Manager at Utah Symphony | Utah Opera for seven years before that.



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