11 Ways for Nonprofits to Build Ties With Lawmakers

By Eden Stiffman


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The beginning of a new Congress is a great opportunity for charities to get in on the ground floor and advocate for their causes.

Whether your organization seeks to protect something it cares about, bring about changes, or beef up legislation, nonprofits must build relationships with elected officials that are mutually beneficial.

"We know that it’s not business as usual in Washington, D.C., this year," says Christopher Kush, author of *The One-Hour Activist* and CEO of Soapbox Consulting, which helps charities develop advocacy strategies. "To really be stewards of the issues we represent, we have to be sure we are actively working on protecting them and supporting them."

If your organization does not meet with policy makers, another organization will, says Mr. Kush. And as the saying goes, "If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu."

The Chronicle asked Mr. Kush and other experts for their advice on how charities should build relationships with legislators.

1. **Get to know your lawmakers.**

If you don't already have strong relationships with federal, state, or local officials, begin a dialogue with them now.

"Just like you want to build relationships with your funders and grant makers," you need to get to know your lawmakers, says Laurel O'Sullivan, a lawyer and founder of the Advocacy Collaborative, which provides training to nonprofits.

Charities should be proactive, laying the groundwork and building ties when they don't have a specific need and are not in an emergency situation, she says. Make sure they know what you do, who your constituency is, and what your clients need.

2. **Show them what you have to offer.**

Nonprofits are often subject-matter experts, and they should use that to their advantage, says Ms. O'Sullivan. They have access to information that lawmakers want on people in their district, they have on-the-ground examples of whether policies are working, and they have stories to share about how they've helped their clients — or not — due to existing policies or resources.

"Elected officials crave information about their districts," says Mr. Kush. They want to know about the programs people use and need. "Talk about the 100 people you serve at home rather than trying to quote statistics from all over the world."

3. **Rely on stories.**

As director of government affairs for the National Fragile X Foundation, Jeffrey Cohen asks volunteer advocates to educate their members of Congress about the genetic disorder.

"In early years, we spent a lot of time trying to make our advocates into policy wonks," he says, but it got too technical. Trying to turn parents into policy experts was difficult at best. Today the group has swung in the opposite direction, asking advocates to show lawmakers photos of their children and share examples of how programs have helped them.

4. **Do your homework.**

"One of the first things advocates need to do is understand where decisions are made and the process by which decisions are made," says Roxana Tynan, executive director at the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy.

Figure out who can help you navigate whatever level of government you're focused on, says Ms. Tynan, whose organization works with officials at the city, county, and state levels.

To be a strategic advocate, you need to understand all the points at which legislation will go through a vote so you can talk to lawmakers ahead of time and turn people out for hearings in support of, or in opposition to, an issue.

The alliance puts together a "power analysis" before meeting with decision makers. This involves finding out everything they can about the lawmaker and what's important to that person before meeting in person. This can help you make connections between your cause and the decision maker, she says.

5. **Time your meeting well.**

Pay attention to federal, state, and local funding cycles when lawmakers decide the level of support they're going to give to different issues.

If you visit Washington when lawmakers are not debating the budget, you often have greater access to members of Congress and can get longer, more relaxed meetings, says Mr. Kush. Of the meetings he helped clients schedule in the last session of Congress, more took place outside the budget and appropriations cycle than in it.

Whereas annual lobbying days can be effective at showing strength in numbers, the work should be a year-round endeavor.

Set up meetings when lawmakers are in their home district, suggests Ms. O'Sullivan. During a legislative recess, they want to connect with their constituents. Sending advocates to the district office can be a great way to build deepen relationships, she says. The district staff members are the ones who have their ear to the ground and are frequently looking for resources they can share with constituents.

Consider inviting an elected official to an event where they can see your organization in action, helping the voters see what the elected official cares about.

6. **Find the right people to attend — and assign roles.**

The smaller the charity, the more senior the staff person should be who attends the meeting, says Mr. Kush. If your organization is tiny, send the executive director. Once a relationship is established, bring in board members and people you serve.

Ms. Tynan always recommends bringing people directly affected by the issue your organization is discussing.

Before going into a meeting, be clear about who will say what. Prepare for around 15 minutes and remind people to be brief. For those who are new to this work, sit down and rehearse, she says. "Get folks really comfortable telling their personal story."

If you're inviting a lawmaker to an event, have somebody assigned as that person's chaperone to welcome him and introduce him around, Ms. O'Sullivan says. Be sure the chaperone knows when the lawmaker will arrive to be ready to greet him.

7. **Don't forget to make a request, whatever it may be.**

Even after an introductory meeting, conclude by asking for assistance. For example, elected officials can help make introductions and guide your organization to resources like information about state and federal grants.

Mr. Kush suggests what he calls the "hook, line, and sinker" approach. Introduce yourself, share one statistic or story, and then make a request.

Keep your list of requests to three or fewer. "You will want to go back to talk about other things in the future," he says. "They can't help you if you ask for too much."

8. **Educating is not lobbying.**

While public charities are allowed to lobby, they do face some limits. And for that reason, charities often worry that they'll cross a legal boundary.

However, educating and talking about important issues with elected officials is "absolutely allowed," Ms. O'Sullivan says. "It's perfectly legal, and it's imperative now more than ever."

However, it may be considered lobbying if you ask a lawmaker to take a position on a piece of legislation.

9. **Hire a lobbyist if...**

"Most nonprofit advocates are the best lobbyists for their organizations," Ms. O'Sullivan says. "They have a lot more expertise than a hired gun."

However, if your organization has the resources to hire someone, it might make sense in some circumstances — for example, if legislation is being considered that will drastically affect your constituents and you don't have the bandwidth to be on Capitol Hill, in the state capital, or in city hall as frequently as you should.

10. **Recognition matters.**

Just as you thank your donors for their support, it's important to recognize a lawmaker who votes in your favor or is supportive otherwise, says Ms. O'Sullivan. If they've done anything to be helpful to you and your staff, give them some public credit for that, she says. That could be in the form of a news release or otherwise.

Mr. Kush recommends waiting a week to follow up after a meeting — but be sure not to forget. "This is the way the office knows that you really do care about what you were talking about," he says. "It's just critical to having the office do something after you're gone."

11. **This work never ends.**

Issues need advocates forever; thinking that you'll have one meeting to win over lawmakers is unrealistic, Mr. Kush says. Make time to regularly update them on what you're doing.

"We need to create time in our work plans to let our elected officials know what we’re up to," says Mr. Kush. "It’s never over."

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