

---

## Four Tips for Effective Grassroots Programs

By: Eric Thorn, Esq.

There is an old saying that just because you don't take an interest in government, that doesn't mean government won't take an interest in you. This rings true when association members find themselves in a situation where a proposed legislation or regulatory action will have costly or burdensome effects on their business or profession. Many times these negative impacts are not intentional and are simply inadvertent results stemming from a policymaker's lack of awareness of the way something impacts your industry or profession. Oftentimes, once there is an awareness of the negative impacts, they can be eliminated or greatly reduced.

Many believe that impacting the legislative process is only possible with a big governmental relations budget and high dollar lobbyists. While both of those can certainly be effective, even smaller and medium sized association can effectively shape policy when they engage their members in an effective grass roots program. And because most of the work is performed by volunteer member advocates, needed activities can typically be accomplished within existing resources even for smaller associations.

Building a grassroots presence before you need it is best. Having a relationship with your lawmaker in advance will make you a more effective advocate than if the first time you meet with you legislator is when you asking for their help in the middle of a crisis.

For an association, grassroots advocacy typically draws upon several association members to become the association's network of local constituent advocates. Each participating member need only reach out directly to their local State Representative and State Senator and educate them on key issues and how they affect their industry or profession. As a result participating members do not have to make a big time commitment.

Ideally, you would like to have at least one member volunteer assigned in the legislative district that they live or work in, for each legislative district, or as many as possible, and to have the member annually contact their local State Senator and State Representative. Depending on the need, the contact can be inviting the elected official to take a tour of your facility or business and see firsthand what you do and meet the people working there. The contact could be a visiting the elected official in their home district office and providing some information about the industry or profession or on a specific piece of legislation that you are trying shape. In some situations a letter or phone call may be the best form of contact.

While this may sound involved or even intimidating for those without previous experience working with elected officials the whole process is very straight forward and many members even find it enjoyable.

From time to time your association may be faced with the need to advocate for or against specific language in a piece of legislation and your members may be called upon to meet with legislators for that purpose. The following are some tips that we share with our clients' members to help them be effective advocates:

**Be Prepared** – have a succinct one pager that explains specifically the wording that needs to be added to or taken out of the bill and why. Time is at a premium during the legislative session and unexpected decisions and meetings arise daily. So being prepared to articulate your message quickly and succinctly, hitting the most important points, and having a one pager you can leave behind for them to review in important to have prepared ahead of the meeting.

**Be Polite** – If the member has to cancel or you end up meeting with their aide, be gracious and polite. Often times, if the member decides to help with your issue the aide can be as big a help as the legislator.

When I worked at legislature, one time there was an important executive who came to meet with a newly elected member of the legislature. Upon entering the legislator's office the executive addressed the young gentleman sitting at the legislator's aide's desk. The executive said, "I'm here to see the Representative." The young man asked, "Can I help you." The executive said hastily that he had an appointment and needed to meet with the Representative and that he would return later. When the executive later returned, the aide's desk was empty so the executive he went to the legislator's office door and looking in saw the same young man he met previously was now sitting behind the Representative's desk. At that moment he realized his mistake and that the newly elected representative that he was to meet was only about 22 years old and that he had mistaken him for his legislative assistant.

The point of that story is that many legislative aides may become legislators, and in this case are the legislator. So be polite to all.

**Be Patient and Flexible** – During the legislative session daily schedules are quite fluid, they are constantly being revised as meetings run long or are pushed back to accommodate other unplanned but necessary meetings. So patience and flexibility is key. It is not at all uncommon to leave a meeting where the start time has been delayed and causes you now to have to rush to barely make the start time of your next scheduled meeting only to find that the legislator's committee meeting has run long and you will have to wait 20 or more minutes.

This type of situation gave birth to a phrase that many around the legislative process use to describe it, "Hurry up and wait."

**Be Persistent** – Without pestering it is important to be persistent and if you are asked to come back by later you should, even if it takes two or three tries. Much that same as when you have to wait, as long as you are pleasant about it, the staff and legislator will respect your effort and recognize it as a sign that your issue is important to you.

Several of our clients have found that they have legislative issues from time to time. Often there are also larger and more well-financed entities involved. But thanks to our established grass roots presence and our consistent and coordinated grass roots advocacy, they have generally been effective in protecting their interests and have fared very well.



Name: Eric Thorn, Esq.

Current Position at Partners: General Counsel

Years in association management: 6

Professional fact: Assist Partners and our clients with business development, regulatory and governmental relations and legal counsel.

Fun fact about yourself: Enjoy fishing, good food and fun travel.