

Ten Commandments of Public Policy Advocacy



1. **Have a Plan.** *What do you want?*

A strategic plan is the map to guide your actions and it should include an assessment of where you are, where you want to go, and how you can get there. It must reflect the timeframe for decision-makers to act on your issue (e.g. the legislative session) and include a contingency plan (or “plan B”) if circumstances change.

2. **Know the Players.** *Start Early.*

Ask “Who controls policy-making on this issue?” The policy-making body may be a school board, a county zoning board, or the state legislature. Regardless of the setting, you are more likely to succeed if your contact with policy-makers is developed well in advance of asking for a particular policy change. Finally, pay attention to the farm team: the school board members and county commissioners of today are likely to be the state legislators tomorrow.

3. **The world is run by those who show up.** *Be there.*

Again, attending school board meetings or county zoning board meetings before your issue goes on the agenda is time well-spent. You will better understand how the decision-making process works and be more effective in your efforts to influence policy-makers.

4. **Do Your Homework.** *Anticipate opposing arguments.*

Always use facts; don’t exaggerate. Never give inaccurate information. When in doubt, offer to check out your information and get back to the policy-maker. Credibility is a strong asset, so always tell the truth. Anticipate the questions policy-makers are likely to have on your topic, including “What’s the fiscal impact?” Anticipate your opposition’s arguments and be prepared to respond.

5. **Be Concise.** *Practice brevity!*

Always be prepared with a brief (90 second) “speech” – one that specifies your issue, the bill or budget item you care about and what you want done.

6. Be Positive and Respectful. *Leave a great impression.*

Avoid sarcasm, no matter how justifiable or witty it appears at the moment. Don't argue. If a policy-maker disagrees with you, stay calm. Offer to supply additional information – part of your effort is to educate – and listen to his/her views. Never threaten.

7. Think before you act. *You can disagree without being disagreeable.*

Unlike a courtroom in which your arguments generally result in a clear cut win or loss, in public policy advocacy success is more often defined as a good compromise. Bear in mind that your adversaries, whether they are other interest groups or certain elected officials, may be the ones you need to sit down with later on and develop the compromise. Moral: shoot to wound, not to kill.

8. Be Careful with Reporters. *The Media is not your friend.*

At times the wiser course of action will be to by-pass media coverage. Look for and act on opportunities for positive media coverage, making sure that it is focused on the issue and not on personalities.

9. Be Patient and Persistent. *Be in it for the long haul.*

While credibility is in large part established by actions taken with honesty and accuracy, it is also a function of patience and commitment...perhaps best described as “being in it for the long haul.” Effective public policy advocacy consists of the continuing search for opportunities to move your priorities forward.

10. Democracy is NOT a spectator sport. SPEAK UP!

“Keep these underlying principles in mind:

Advocacy assumes that people have rights, and those rights are enforceable.

Advocacy works best when focused on something specific.

Advocacy is chiefly concerned with rights or benefits to which someone is already entitled.

And policy advocacy in particular is concerned with ensuring that institutions work the way they should.” (Nancy Amidei, 1991)

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Sources for this document: Nancy Amidei, “So you Want To Make a Difference,” PMB Watch, 1742 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, D.C., 20009; Capitol Services, Inc.; various advocacy training materials developed by the firm, 526 Townsend, Lansing, MI 48933; Jim Shultz, “Strategy Development: Key Questions for Developing an Advocacy Strategy,” The Democracy Center, P.O. Box 22157, San Francisco, CA 94122.