



TEN BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

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Navigating the federal government has increasingly become complicated, crowded, and political. Tactics and strategies around engagement have evolved in recent years. Successful efforts to impact policy are now focused on the broader policy ecosystem, and advocacy requires a more sophisticated and targeted strategy than ever before. Winning campaigns are responding to emerging trends, leveraging technology, and constantly innovating; those who are losing remain committed to tactics of yesteryear.

Here are the ten best practices from successful DC-focused policy engagement campaigns:

1

Build a Strong Brand

Policymakers respect and trust well-branded organizations. Before trying to advance a policy priority, organizations should spend time strengthening their brand in Washington, DC. This could include elevating a new and unknown organization, or re-positioning an existing organization away from a negative or partisan brand. Regardless, having a strong brand matters and it helps to build trust with policymakers, position the organization as a thought leader or resource, and advance policy priorities. There are many organizations that are seeking policy solutions; the organizations that spend the time to build a brand are better positioned for success.

2

Embrace Innovation & Technology

When I first arrived on Capitol Hill, 50 identical constituent faxes sent to our office on one topic was alarming and certainly put a policy issue on our radar. Clearly, things have changed. Technology is driving engagement with policymakers at all levels in the federal government. From digital advertising and virtual briefings to social media and email campaigns, policy issues can now reach more targets in a much shorter timeframe. Campaigns must be innovative, broad, and aggressive – all of which requires technology to play an important role. The next revolution is how we use data to measure influence and understand new insights in how we communicate and engage with stakeholders.

3

Be Loyal to the Solution, Not the Tactic

Too many organizations enter the federal policy ecosystem with a loyalty to one specific tactic. Since impacting policy throughout the federal government has become more complex, stakeholders need to arrive in DC with a toolbox of tactics and the flexibility to use them, which could include a combination of advocacy, digital marketing, communications, and legal – or all the above. Prescribing a tactic before defining the solution is like someone buying a home without deciding which city they want to live in first.

4

Value Strategy Above Networks

Not long ago, engaging in DC was dependent on “who you know.” Today, there are many people who know a lot of people; networks are important, but they are not as much of a differentiator as they once were. Sophisticated strategies drive impact and ultimately win in DC. While networks may be an important tool, opening doors is a small piece of the puzzle in a town of many competing door openers. Comprehensive strategies have an impact that reaches well beyond a series of meetings and is well worth the investment.

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Engage Both Sides of the Political Aisle

A partisan strategy is short-sighted and generally ineffective in a political climate that is always evolving. Despite the overwhelming partisanship in DC, there is a surprising amount of collaboration across the political aisle, especially at the committee level. While spending time on one side of the aisle may be an advantage today, it could be a massive disadvantage tomorrow. Every effective advocacy campaign covers both sides of the aisle even when the issue may not garner bipartisan support.

6

Position the Issue Locally

It is easy to believe that all policy matters are decided within DC. But, the most influential advocates are the constituents and voters back home. Positioning issues, in part, with an eye to how it impacts a policymaker's constituency is extremely important. At the same time, ensuring that local staff know the issues and understand their impacts is vital to securing the support of a policymaker. Issues can be won with a DC-only approach on occasion, but localizing the issues exponentially increases likelihood of success.

7

Position Engagement as a Dialogue

The least effective advocacy tactic is probably the "one and done" meeting – coming to DC once per year for meetings (maybe on a fly-in) and never communicating with those policymakers until the following year. This is not impactful in any way and any annual request will quickly get silenced by the onslaught of other competing issues that reach the policymakers on a more regular basis. It is important that advocacy includes regular communication and a consistent (even repetitive) message that remains top-of-mind for policymakers. It seems pretty obvious that a policy request will be better positioned if there is steady communication, but many advocates rely on the annual DC visit which may be a nice change of scenery but will never get the job done.

8

Leverage a Cycle of Policy Wins

People think of a win in DC as a singular point in time – a bill getting signed into law, specific agency guidance being released, or a procurement contract being signed. In doing so, they focus on the single win and regularly miss opportunities for smaller, impactful wins that can build momentum and get an issue across the finish line faster. For any issue, questions during a hearing, bill report language, communications to a federal agency, statements on the House/Senate floor, White House engagement, or a policymaker site visit are all wins that can substantially impact the overall issue. Missing these steps can make getting a solution across the finish line more difficult. Taking advantage of opportunities for wins throughout the policy cycle is vital to success.

9

Treat Each Engagement as Unique

Every advocacy campaign is different. There are essentially four categories of advocacy engagements in DC – policy, funding, risk mitigation, and oversight. Not only do strategies vary for each of them, but strategies vary depending on the issue and the targets; engaging federal agencies on a funding issue, for example, is very different than engaging Congress or the White House on a tax issue. There is no single plan for engagement and every single one should be treated as a unique effort.

10

Play the Long Game

Engagement in DC is generally not a short-term exercise. Policy climates and policymakers change rapidly. Effective organizations shape issues in their infancy because they are consistently engaged. Those who engage when an issue emerges are already behind the curve and are forced to start their engagement by being responsive to decisions that have already been made. If organizations want to impact a policy space, they should engage early and remain engaged for the long-term.

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