

GETTING ON THE RADAR SCREEN

A Lobbying Primer for Museums



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Canadian Association
of Zoos and Aquariums
Association canadienne des
jardins zoologiques & aquariums

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LOBBYING

For some, the word is still associated with kick-backs and corruption, and conjures up images of shadowy figures exchanging favours. In fact, lobbying is now an accepted and integral part of our political system, and is conducted within a clear set of rules established by Parliament to ensure transparency and accountability.



The term lobbying is commonly used to describe a broad range of activities aimed at influencing government. These include submissions of formal briefs, committee appearances, informal meetings with cabinet ministers and their staff, MPs or civil servants, as well as grass-roots and media campaigns.

In its simplest form, lobbying or advocacy—to use a more genteel term—is designed to influence public policy to promote the interests of a particular group. It also helps governments set priorities by informing them of the needs and desires of the population. Lobbyists—from interest groups to professional or trade associations—feed the political system by providing governments with information on emerging issues and by acting as a sounding board for possible policy initiatives. In return, they receive benefits for their members or clients in the form of favourable policy decisions from government.

Professional associations such as the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) or the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums (CAZA), while providing a broad range of services to their members, have advocacy as their primary function; their *raison d'être*. These organizations provide individuals and institutions with a collective voice and the ability to define issues on the national scene.

This document is simply a primer. It is a kind of "Lobbying 101" manual that looks at some of the theoretical and practical foundations of lobbying and outlines some strategies and tactics that can be used to influence public policy.

THE POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

Whenever discussing lobbying, it is useful to look at the political system as a kind of marketplace where demand, unlike supply, is unlimited. Governments have to decide between competing and sometimes contradictory interests on a regular basis. This holds true for all levels of government, from the municipal council having to make a land-use zoning decision to the federal government deciding on awarding a major defense contract.

Looking at the system from this perspective, one can easily understand the competitive nature of the political process—a process whereby every policy decision from government is based on a trade-off. Simply put, in our system, a dollar given to one group is a dollar taken from another. This perspective helps identify not only the obstacles that may stand in the way of your goals, but also the opportunities that may present themselves.

GETTING A PROFILE

Understanding the competitive nature of the political process is the first step in becoming an effective lobbyist or advocate. Understanding that the limited resources governments have to dole out include not only money but time and attention is the second step.



Today, because of cuts to the public service, it has become more difficult for interest groups to have access to or even get the attention of senior decision-makers within the bureaucracy. A meeting with a senior official may be cordial and positive, but if he or she doesn't have the time or the staff to follow up, it will have been a wasted opportunity. Worse still, lobbyists may leave the meeting with the impression that their file was being favourably addressed only to realize much later—perhaps too late—that nothing has been done.

The competitive environment in which advocacy takes place means that organizations that want their message heard by government must raise their voices above the cacophonous din of public wants and desires. In Ottawa parlance it's called getting a profile.

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

There are a number of ways in which groups get the government's attention. Organizations that lobby successfully from the "inside" do so thanks to the compelling nature of their arguments as well as their credibility.

Others may use grass-roots techniques of membership mobilization. But in most instances, for a group to get the government's attention—and hold it—it also has to make its issue the government's issue. In other words, it has to get it on the public agenda.

The issue has to be framed in a manner that shows it to be in the public interest, not just in the interest of the group or organization advocating it.

For example, a manufacturing industry that seeks more advantageous capital allowance rules from the Department of Finance would probably argue, through its trade association, that such a disposition would encourage investment in new equipment, improve the industry's competitiveness in a global marketplace and either protect existing jobs or help create new ones. Even though the real goal is to improve the company's bottom line, their argument—delivered by a national organization—must be crafted in a manner that demonstrates that it would be in the public interest to make those kinds of changes to Canada's tax regime.

Because governments tend to define the public interest based on their own set of political priorities, effective lobbying requires an awareness of their agenda. The successful lobbyists are therefore ones that can best define their group's goals within the parameters of the government's—or a particular minister's—agenda.

DECISION MAKING

Finally, effective lobbying requires an understanding of the government's decision-making process. This includes an appreciation of the relations that exist between the politicians and the bureaucracy, and the role that each play in decision making.

As a general rule, lobbying is best initiated at the bureaucratic level. Unless your issue is of such significance as to require the minister's immediate attention, it is always best to begin selling your ideas within the bureaucracy. In fact, adopting



the opposite approach may be seen by some civil servants as an attempt to “make a political end run” around them, thus making them unsympathetic to your cause.

This is not to say that ministers have become redundant in our political system. Cabinet ministers have functional control of their departments, but the complexity and the sheer number of issues confronting them make it impossible for them to focus on more than a handful of files. Ministers and their staff tend to look at “the big picture” and leave the day-to-day administrative and policy development matters to their officials.

The time to “pitch” an idea, project or demand to a minister is after having worked it through the bureaucracy. The key is to try to get a favourable recommendation from the bureaucrats before taking the idea to the minister—an unfavourable recommendation or assessment from the bureaucracy will more often than not sink your project.

Within the civil service there exist two classes of bureaucrats: One is the *political* bureaucrat, usually found at the most senior levels, namely Deputy Minister, Assistant Deputy Minister and Director General. The other is the *operational* bureaucrat, usually at the Director level or below.

Without being partisan, the *political* bureaucrats are not politically neutral. Their jobs require them to give policy advice and they have a major say as to the policy alternatives that are placed before ministers. As a result, the successful ones tend to be in tune with the government’s and the minister’s political agenda. The *operational* bureaucrats, on the other hand, are more concerned with the implementation of policy rather than its formulation.

Each type of bureaucrat has an essential role to play in the functioning of government, so it is important to ensure that an issue is taken to the right one which is not always easy since sometimes the distinctions between policy

TIPS ON HOW TO PRACTISE “QUIET DIPLOMACY:”

- Know how the public policy process works.
- Keep contact with the key policy people including elected officials and their advisors in the departments and agencies relevant to your organization.
- Make your interventions early in the policy process.
- Observe the confidentiality of off-the-record discussions with bureaucrats and politicians.
- Build relations with the government based on a willingness to seek accommodation.
- Appear supportive of the government’s or minister’s goals, casting your organization as a partner in problem-solving. Always articulate ways in which you can serve the government’s agenda.
- Be willing to accept short-term defeats in the interest of maintaining good relations over the longer term. Use the defeats or slights as a bargaining chip for future compensation.

and operations can be blurred. As a general rule, a matter of policy is best addressed at the Director General level or higher; a technical question or a matter of implementation of policy can be brought to the attention of less senior officials.



Although they remain the dominant actors in the development of policies, departments do not have a monopoly on policy formulation. For instance, parliamentary committees may from time to time hold sway over a particular issue, or the Prime Minister's Office or Privy Council Office may take particular interest in a file—any of these situations can shift policy making from departmental bureaucrats to another agency. Interest groups must therefore be able to adjust their lobbying tactics accordingly.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS OF LOBBYING

In trying to persuade government to pursue certain policies, interest groups resort to various techniques including the use of well-prepared arguments or the force of public opinion. Our political system, however, tends to favour and reward what is called "elite accommodation" and consensus-seeking techniques over confrontation.

The most successful interest groups are those that maintain a fairly consistent level of access to key political and bureaucratic decision-makers. They do so by presenting themselves as partners-in-problem-solving of the government or minister and by avoiding the open confrontation of, for example, appeals to opposition parliamentarians. The organizations that adopt this approach are usually organizations with a diversified membership base that bring a large number of issues to the table. This allows the organization to lobby on a number of tracks at the same time and accept short-term defeats for the sake of other, perhaps more significant, campaigns. Usually, they also tend to share—or at least manage to live with—the general ideology of the government of the day. Their approach involves making their issues the government's issues, and allowing the government to proceed by not getting in the way.

While the importance of developing public support must not be understated, ongoing, behind-the-scenes lobbying will continue to be the most effective approach for those interested in influencing public policy.

But what if quiet diplomacy fails? What if the cooperative approach fails to elevate the issue on the government's agenda? In such a case, the organization may be forced to advocate for an issue from a more confrontational, or at least public, angle.

The public approach to advocacy can take many forms, having many strategic points of departure and destinations. In other words, there may be many different motivations for public advocacy, but the immediate goal is always to try to define the issue in terms of the public agenda.



Typically, public advocacy tends to favour a mix of techniques that always includes use of the mass media to communicate the nature of the issue, some form of grass roots mobilization and often some coalition building. When engaging in a public advocacy campaign, the organization will try to generate a sense of urgency around an issue as well as broadly based support for a particular solution. The objective in such a strategy is to get the issue on the government's agenda.

CONCLUSION

The growing complexity of governance in a time of fiscal restraint is both a challenge and an opportunity for lobbyists. On the one hand it has become more difficult to get—and hold—the attention of bureaucrats and politicians alike as the resources at their disposal shrink. On the other hand, because of the lack of resources, governments are in need of partners.

This situation means that advocacy is now primarily conducted as a mix of “quiet diplomacy” and public lobbying. The former allows the cultivation of the bureaucratic and political contacts necessary to have your issue addressed, while the latter is needed to get the government's attention.

WHEN LAUNCHING A PUBLIC ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN, IT IS IMPORTANT TO TAKE THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

- Understand the forces that shape public opinion and be prepared to marshal them.
- Cultivate public opinion through ongoing use of the mass media but also through conferences, meetings with other stakeholder groups that share a similar agenda, etc.
- Build alliances with other organizations that share your concerns. Try to advocate a common position.
- Develop the capacity to marshal grass-roots activism from your members.
- Maintain contact with the bureaucracy and politicians so that the campaign does not blindsides them. Even as you conduct a public campaign you have to remember who it is that has the power to address your concerns.

