

You Can Be a Lobbyist

By: Patricia A. O'Malley

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Last week I wrote about the legislative process – how laws are made. I mentioned that lobbyists frequently write all or parts of the bills introduced by legislators. Today I'll explain more about lobbyists.

Lobbyists are often in the news. Jack Abramoff was a professional lobbyist until he pled guilty to three federal and two state felonies involving bribery of government officials. While they're usually portrayed as evil creatures, not all of them are bad. A lobbyist is simply someone who works to convince legislators – local, state, or federal – to support or oppose particular issues or legislation. Yes, they can be unethical and corrupt, but most of them are honest people, just doing their jobs. It's usually the dishonest ones who find their names in the news.

There have been lobbyists as long as there have been legislators. The term arose in the United States in the 1830s when representatives of large companies and organizations gathered in the lobby of the US Capitol Building to try to persuade legislators to vote for or against pending legislation. The business has come a long way. Now there are huge firms of professional lobbyists working for and against every issue under the sun.

There are very strict rules about professional lobbyists and what gifts they can give to legislators. "Gifts" can often be seen as bribes. Professional lobbyists are required by law to register with legislative offices. Ethics rules require legislators to list every gift they receive regardless of the value or the source. For details on these rules, visit the Web sites listed below.

While you probably won't be paid for it, you can be a lobbyist, too. There are two simple steps:

- You know what's important to you. Be familiar with those issues. You don't have to be an expert. Just follow the news. You can also find plenty of information on the Internet. There are organizations working on every topic. You can join them or subscribe to their newsletters.
- Contact your legislators and let them know how you feel, and how you want them to vote.

You have every right to contact your legislators as often as you like, about any topic you choose, and it does make a difference. Legislators' staff people keep track of *every* communication they receive – letters, phone calls, post cards, faxes, e-mails, and petitions. While your letter may not guarantee that your legislator will vote the way you'd like, every comment counts. More comments on an issue will carry more weight. Legislators know that for every communication they receive, hundreds of other people have the same opinion. While every communication is important, the more personal ones are more effective. A phone call carries more weight than a mass petition, and an individual letter carries more weight than a phone call.

To have even more clout, gather some friends or join an organization and visit your legislators in their district offices. You may not be able to get an appointment with the legislator personally, but meeting with staff people is just as important. Because they can't be everywhere, legislators rely on their staffs to keep them in touch with the public. Also, many legislators host town meetings a few times a year, when they meet with the public to answer questions. That's a great opportunity to get acquainted. Sometimes legislative committees hold hearings to give the public an opportunity to comment on particular issues.

Since Congress does most of its work through committees, you should know which committees oversee your issues. Committees are very powerful in Congress. Committee chairs decide which bills go to the entire membership for votes. They can push a bill quickly, or kill it on the spot. Committees also employ staff people who specialize in their fields. There is a list of committees on www.usa.gov but be careful, the committee title does not always reflect its complete issue area.

So, once you decide what issues you care most about, you can spend as much or as little time as you like contacting your representatives. And don't forget the chairs and other members of the committees that handle your issues. Even if you don't live in their districts, you can contact them with your concerns, too. There are thousands of books about effective lobbying techniques. Visit your local library or bookstore.

Good luck!

To find committees' or legislators' names, addresses, Web sites, and phone numbers,

Call: 1-800-FED INFO (1-800-333-4636) or

Go to: www.usa.gov

For more information on lobbying,

Go to: www.infoplease.com; www.house.gov; www.senate.gov; or

www.dos.state.pa.us/campaignfinance

*Pat O'Malley is a consultant to nonprofit agencies.
Please send comments, questions, and topic suggestions to
communitymatters@patomalley-consulting.com.*