

Five Rules for Effective Advocacy

Advocacy can be very complicated, and some of what professional advocates do requires a lot of experience and sophistication. But there are some basic rules that anyone can follow, and everyone -- including the least experienced -- can learn to be effective.

Rule #1: Advocacy just means “speaking up”

Advocacy can include activities like organizing a mass demonstration on the Capitol steps, or filing a lawsuit in court, but the most basic form of advocacy is just plain “Speaking Up.” Even if you are terribly shy, you can “speak up” -- e.g., by putting the name of your program or issue in bold letters on the back of the folder you carry to the Capitol, and then just make sure it faces out! Or you can leave a hand-written note at your legislator’s office... or you can call and leave a Voice Mail message on a machine. The only thing you CAN’T do is not communicate. You can do whatever feels best for you so long as you: WRITE. CALL. VISIT.

Rule #2: Learn to think in terms of 51%

Elected officials have to think in terms of 51% and so should we. They know they need 51% of the voters in their district to get/stay in office; they need 51% of their colleagues on a Committee of the full House or Senate to get something passed. When we come to them with an idea or a request, they wonder: is this something 51% of the voters (my Committee colleagues, the legislature) could go along with? In other words, they’ll want to know whether anybody else supports what we want.

One way to convey that our issues are supported by more than just us is by mentioning the groups we belong to -- because groups convey numbers. Even bigger numbers are conveyed when our issue is supported by a Coalition, which is just: “an organization of organizations.” And if we have taken the trouble to build our Coalitions with all of our likely allies PLUS some unlikely allies, they will quickly understand that our issues have the potential to attract broad voter support -- that critical 51%.

Rule #3: Always keep two audiences in mind: elected officials (and their staff) and other voters

It is essential to let your elected officials and their staff know how you feel and the reasons. But one lone voice probably won’t cause them to vote a particular way. However, if enough of the voters in their district feel as you do -- and let them know it -- that can be very persuasive. So our job includes informing other voters as well as our legislators. I’ve seen some very effective advocacy by people who use the simple device of carrying on a conversation with a friend, out loud, in public. “Did you hear what they’re proposing to do down at the Capitol? It’s going to affect every family in this state and I’ll bet most people don’t even know about it yet...” You can do that in the grocery store or across a crowded playing field. One woman said she especially liked using this form of advocacy in elevators: “You know they can’t get off!”

THEIR FUTURE IS OUR BUSINESS.

Rule #4: Be sure THEY hear YOU

So far all the rules are easy; this one is a bit tricky. That's partly because elected officials have a lot more practice doing the talking -- and will dominate a conversation if we give them half a chance, and partly because sometimes when we finally meet our legislators, we freeze up. Something about the process and the setting can be intimidating, it's true. But here are three good techniques for getting past the freeze point:

1. Bring something with you that you have to explain (a photo, a small album that tells about your program, a fact sheet to explain); that way you'll do the talking and they'll listen;
2. Memorize a little speech, just a minute-and-a-half or two minutes long. It should include: your name; that you live/vote in their district; any organization or coalition that you represent; what you're there to talk about; what you want them to do ("I want you to vote FOR..."); and hand over a one- or two-page fact sheet that includes a name, address, and phone #. That would make a good visit. If you have time, go into more detail.
3. Invite your legislator(s) to moderate a panel, not to give a speech. When you invite your legislators to give a speech to your group, you will hear them, but not the other way around. However, if you ask them to moderate a panel, and put on that panel individuals you'd like the legislator to hear, the listening goes in a different direction.

Rule #5: Always keep the door open for the next time

Some people will tell you not to worry about the legislators who are your "friends" and not waste time on your opponents. Just concentrate on the "swing" votes who might go either way, they say. I think that's poor advice on all counts. First, our "friends" need to hear from us. They need to hear us say "thank you," and they need to hear our newest, best information and arguments. Second, it is very difficult to predict how someone is going to vote' few votes are certain in advance. And third, the surest rule of politics is that today's opponent is tomorrow's potential ally -- and vice-versa. Don't ever write anyone off. Children can't afford to alienate anyone, and as their advocates, neither can we.