

13 Ways To Create Good Luck in the Legislature

These tips can help you succeed in any state legislative session. You can use the same principles with local elected officials, too.

1 Be specific on what you want from a legislator, county commissioner, or executive branch official. This is a better session to ask for *changes in law* rather than ask for *more money*. If it's money – even if it's the same as you got last year – say exactly how much and what it's for. If it's a law or regulation you want, try to say and write in plain English how you think the law should read.

When I worked as a staffer in the Fiscal Research Division of the General Assembly, I had a legislator come to me with a letter from a constituent because he couldn't figure out what *bill* the constituent was talking about, *who* the sponsor was, or even what the *problem* was. He wanted to help, but the constituent hadn't been specific in what she wanted.

2 Work at the committee level. Always talk to the committee *chair* and the committee *staff*. If you wait until a decision is made by the full House or Senate, you've waited too long, you have less chance of affecting policy, and you've narrowed your options. The staff in a part-time citizen legislature are key. And they're among the most talented people in state government.

The power of committee chairs is a very important lesson. I worked on a health care bill one time and worked hard to get a good sponsor. But the day the bill was introduced, it wasn't referred to the Health Committee but to the Banking Committee. I immediately ran to the sponsor and asked him what the problem was.

He said, "There's no problem at all. I'm the Chairman of the Banking Committee. We're assured of getting a favorable report there and getting it

to the floor." He was right; the bill passed in 5 minutes!

3 Put your position and what you want in writing. The process of writing it down will actually refine your own thinking and help the policymaker. But don't use jargon or acronyms from your own field. This is most nonprofits' biggest weakness. And, keep it brief – one page if you can.

4 Do your homework on your facts, and about the people in the legislature. What's the legislator's background? What does their spouse do? Check out their website.

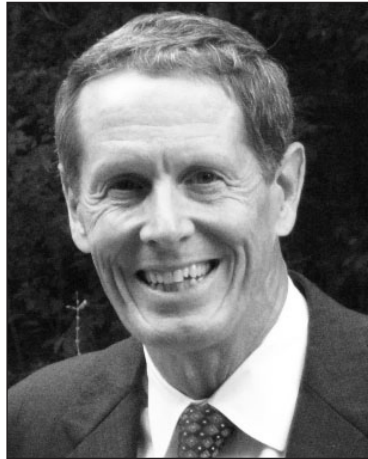
Produce a fact sheet that supports your position and check behind yourself.

As 19th century humorist Artemis Ward said, "It ain't so much the things we don't know that get us in trouble. It's the things we do know that just ain't so." Never lie, and don't try to hide facts that cut against your position; you'll lose the trust of the

public official. Your credibility is your most effective asset in advocacy or lobbying.

5 Use your numbers of people – your clients, members, board members, volunteers, and your peers in other communities. *Nothing* impresses a legislator like large numbers, and numbers are most nonprofits' main strength.

There are four main resources in public policy – money, talent, credibil-



Ran Coble

ity, and people. Nonprofits don't usually have money and can't legally contribute to campaigns, but they *do* have talent and credibility and they often have lots of people.

The most effective groups have as many of their members, board members, clients, and volunteers call as many legislators in as many districts as possible.

But, don't concentrate all your calls on one person because then you'll get one vote. Call as many members of the committee or policymaking

group as possible. Call the opponents on the committee last, but do call them. This may make them more willing to compromise or at least keep them from being so vocal.

6 Form an alliance or coalition with other groups with the same concerns. There is strength in numbers, but even greater strength in greater numbers.

7 Don't ever threaten elected officials – saying, for example, that you'll see that they won't get re-elected! It makes them do the opposite of what you want. Some people are unrealistic about how fast change can happen in the legislature. As George Carlin said about false expectations, "I put a dollar in one of those change machines, but nothing changed!"

8 Go visit the decision makers in person. The "system" in North Carolina is still remarkably open. Ask the legislators or policymakers point-blank, but diplomatically, if they support your position. It's much harder for a policymaker to say "no" to a person than to a sheet of paper. Don't be intimidated; they are people just like you.

The lobbyists that I think are really effective keep a tally sheet after visiting legislators. They record one of

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these: (a) for your position; (b) leaning for your position; (c) undecided; (d) leaning against; or (e) against. After the vote, they check how each legislator actually voted so they can learn from their mistakes.

Being a good vote counter is the highest level of skill in lobbying. As one of my favorite lobbyists told me, "Experience is something I always think I have – until I get more of it."

9 Meet with your opposition and

see if you can reach a compromise. Having both sides present a compromise or consensus position is a very powerful tool for getting something passed. In effect, it solves legislators' problem of not wanting to make somebody unhappy. Even if you can't reach a compromise, talking to the other side at least prepares you for what their arguments will be.

10 Look out for the words, "We need to study this."

You're about to get sent to the graveyard of a subcommittee that may never meet or a study commission that may never get appointed.

11 Take advantage of pivotal events that present an opportunity to put your issue on the public agenda. For example:

- ▼ A tragic shooting with an unregistered gun might be an opportunity for a gun control group.
- ▼ A government scandal paves the way for a group advocating for reforms in campaign finance or ethics.
- ▼ A manufacturing plant that got state tax incentives to locate in NC and then closed up gave the Institute for Constitutional Law a chance to highlight its arguments against this practice.
- ▼ A hurricane, ice storm, flood, or other natural disaster might present an opportunity for relief groups or for advocates for new floodplain maps.
- ▼ A fire at a poultry plant in Hamlet and an explosion at a Cary storage facility for hazardous chemicals can lead to reforms in workplace safety or stricter rules on storing hazardous waste.

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12 Be prepared for the four questions that public officials ask most frequently:

(a) **What will it cost?** If you think it will cost \$0, you probably need a self-administered dose of truth serum. It's rare that *somebody's* money,

resources, or time is not involved.

(b) **Have other states tried it?**

Legislators are especially interested in what's happened in other Southern states. That's why in the debates here about whether NC should

start a lottery, one of the arguments used by *proponents* was that NC was surrounded by states with lotteries, and one of *opponents'* arguments was that studies in other states (like Florida) showed that lotteries often didn't really end up increasing the total amount of money going to education.

(c) **How do you know it will work?**

(d) **Who else is for it and who is against it?**

13 Thank the official when you get help or get what you want. Praise them in a letter to the editor (but *not* as a campaign endorsement). Give them an award. Let your members know who helped them, and ask them to thank the official, too. Public officials usually only hear from people who are dissatisfied.

To keep them on your side, you have to let them know that their action is helping someone. Tell them what happened as a result of that bill being passed. Thanking someone is often the best form of advocacy. ■

– Ran Coble

Ran Coble is executive director of the nonprofit N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. He has served as staff for the legislature and legal counsel for what is now the N.C. Department of Health & Human Services. He presented these tips at the N.C. Center for Nonprofits' recent advocacy workshop sponsored by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.

Crafting Your Message for the 2011 Legislature

The best argument for any advocate in this legislative session is that your proposal will create jobs.

On the budget, a good argument this year is that your proposal will save money now. To legislators this year, it means "What can I cut?" Remember that they're likely to cut 15-20% to balance the budget this year, so a lot of you may be targets of budget cuts.

If you find yourself in that situation, the best advice I can give you is to focus on the impact of a budget cut on your clients, the people you serve in their legislative district. Take your clients to the legislature so that the impact of a budget cut has a face on it. And, when the legislators are home – usually on Mondays, Fridays, and weekends – take them to see what you're doing and whom a budget cut would affect. Visiting a daycare center or foster home or talking to children and parents will stick in their minds a lot longer than a piece of paper.

One thing I'm most proud of in my career is helping to get legislation passed that gave children with disabilities a right to an education in NC – two years before the federal law passed. I think it passed because we took legislators to visit programs serving children with different kinds of disabilities. They saw that these children were very capable of learning and being productive citizens.

If you can't get legislators to go see a program, use the power of stories. Public policy issues have faces. I've seen people afflicted with spina bifida visit their lawmakers to tell them their stories. People in wheelchairs made the problem more real. And nonprofits have good stories to tell! ■