

2b

Communication Handbook - Factsheet 2.b

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Target Audiences: Communicating projects to policy makers

- ⇒ Things to consider when planning communications with decision makers
- ⇒ Things to consider when planning a lobbying campaign
- ⇒ Lobbying is a long game – have realistic goals



Policy makers are one of your main project target groups and you should follow the same principles of strategic communications as for all your other key stakeholders.

As in any strategic communications planning you need to identify your communication aims, your key messages and your tactics.

Analyses

You should analyse this target group in the same as with all others – think about their influence and interest in your project and their familiarity and favourability with the themes that it covers. Use the same analysis tools that we covered in the Factsheet 2 (target audiences).

The analysis is the same but this target group is highly specialised in many ways including the following

- + Policy makers and politicians are affected by the concerns of their constituents (and their votes!). Most politicians have published speeches, articles, positions in public – do some rudimentary desk research and find out what interests them.
- + They are interested in issues that affect people at a local level – news and stories that affect their electorate have impact on them.
- + They are interested in the very local - therefore you should scan the local media for items that may be of interest.
- + They are also interested in the very large – they probably sit on certain parliamentary or legislative committees (energy, health, employment, industry etc.). Find out which committee they are on and adapt your communications.
- + Apart from independants, politicians are part of a wider political party that sets out policies on issues. Find out their positions.
- + Their attention span is time bound and is affected by the passage of legislation, elections or other big new items that make it onto the agenda.
- + There are a whole host of other organisations, think-tanks and interest groups trying to exert influence on them at the same time – there is chance of building coalitions of like-minded organisations.

Things to consider when planning communications

What tactics are going to be most effective to reach your objectives? As with all communications activities you should consider the following:

Positioning your project

You want your politician to understand your project and view it positively. How do you go about positioning a project to extract maximum value?

- + Raise profile – project events, research, recognition by linking it to common new stories on local issues that matter to the electorate

- + Organise round table discussion forums with local chambers of commerce or other interest groups, think-tanks.
- + Enhance position – organise media activities or proposals that demonstrate that public money is being wisely spent under this administration
- + Define usefulness – do your research to determine if the politician is willing to compromise, easy to work with. You can use fairly basic on-line desk research to find out their positions (and their party), speeches, articles on the themes of your project.
- + Policy makers and their assistants read and watch the same news as all of us. Be aware of what's in the news and what issues are affecting the public. This will be of interest to policy makers.

Advocacy and influencing

This involves leading the decision-maker to the conclusion him or herself, in other words, presenting the facts and allowing the decision-maker to reach his/her own decision. It is important to:

- + Tie in your project outputs, achievements, findings with decision-makers' own interests
- + Explain the effect and impact of legislation in powerful and emotive terms, but have rational arguments as well
- + Use third-party testimony (i.e. their electorate) to reinforce your message objectively
- + Build coalitions with other organisations, groups who are trying to influence them

Timing

Many campaigns fail not because of weak tactics or strategy, but due to a failure to recognise the impact of timing on a public policy campaign. To avoid such problems:

- + Note the legislative process – key elements can be time sensitive (e.g. formal consultation periods)
- + Prepare time to spend on critical decision-making points
- + Pre-plan around timing issues (hold campaign meetings just before key events)

Things to consider when planning a lobbying campaign

Align your interests with the politician's interests

Help your legislator to understand why your position is important to him or her. One of the best ways is to show how your position and objectives align with his or her constituents. Constituents are voters.

Being able to connect public policy to EU citizen impact is a highly valued exercise. National and regional authorities are often not instinctively sympathetic to the impact of projects, but they are usually acutely sensitive to the wider themes that affect their constituents.

Do your homework

Understand your issue, the legislation you support or oppose and the legislative process before you approach your legislator. Know who the key stakeholders are, who decides what, and which issues are hot at the moment. This requires a firm understanding of the political process and the rules and conventions of that process. Make sure you know the key decision-makers, their background and the trigger points for any public policy process. To be able to put things in the right context, to assess what's really relevant to your project.

Information is power

A strategic information system is necessary for any public affairs work. The other key is the distribution of information to legislators and their constituents. Lobbying should be an exchange of information. Be prepared to give the policy maker information that he or she can use, but make sure that information contains evidence to substantiate your arguments. Another art of lobbying is to simplify (not falsify) data and arguments enough so that it can be easily grasped by all decision-makers and stakeholders involved.

A little professionalism goes a long way

Policy makers are always impressed by professional behaviour. This behaviour is exemplified by the way you approach your work.

- + First impressions are key
- + Don't use threats – credibility with decision-makers is the single biggest asset of a lobbyist
- + Respond flexibly to new information
- + Set the boundaries of what you can do – never offer what you cannot deliver
- + Be transparent about who you are and why you are there

Be positive

Whenever possible, put forward a positive vision of change. In certain markets it will not work for the lobbyist to simply argue for the total elimination of proposed legislation. A more promising solution is to anticipate the type of compromise that could be acceptable and to know the moment and circumstances to sell it to the right decision-makers. Make your case without being critical of others' personalities or motives. Explain why support is in the best interest of the decision-maker but don't over sell your case.

Build a bond, not a gap

Research things that you might have in common with the policy maker. Use shared values to create easy, friendly, frequent communication. Devote energy and resources to maintaining the relationship: approaching just when an issue arises - defines a lobbyist as an opportunist, not a companion in the legislative process. And opportunists don't make friends.

Be a partner

Build coalitions and look for allies among other organisations. Become known as a reliable resource: always deliver on promises. Insert yourself among the main protagonists on an issue. Issues eventually consolidate among a few drivers.

Lobbying is a long game – have realistic goals

Aim for consensus rather than victory. Politics is a series of battles, so be prepared for an occasional set-back on the road to winning the long-term goal. Be prepared to build in pressure release mechanisms (review periods, sunset clauses, monitoring mechanisms, devolved detail to regulators, etc.) to keep particularly tough legislation at bay. Keep the mission as the main objective, be flexible on tactics and think long-term. Always have a plan B in your pocket.