

What to Know Before You Go!

Asks and Goals

Knowing What You Want: Making the Ask

It's surprising how many people decide to advocate without really understanding what they're advocating for (or against). Understanding and making an "ask" sends the signal to the elected official that you would like them to do something specific. In decision-making environments (like legislatures and agencies), communications with questions that must be answered rise far above general "educational" messages. There are two types of asks, specifically policy and relationship-building.



Policy Asks

When we think about "advocacy," the asks we usually focus on are "policy asks." These include things like "vote for this bill" or "reduce this particular tax." Before making a policy ask, though, it's always a good idea to know whether the people you're talking to can even do what you want.

What types of policy actions can legislators take?



Whether dealing with the local, state or federal level, there are a pretty specific set of policy-related or "official" actions that a legislator can take. It can be overwhelming, but usually, there's some association out there somewhere that's already working on the issue. ***Before you get started, do a quick internet search to see if someone has already done the***

policy research work for you!

- Introduce legislation

One of the legislator's main roles is to propose changes to laws and/or funding for programs within the jurisdiction they serve. So, for example, if you believe that

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businesses operating in the city should recycle trash, you might ask your city council member to propose a recycling law. Or, if you believe your state government should invest more of the state's budget in libraries, you might ask your state legislator to propose an increase in funding as part of the budget process. Similarly, if you believe that low-income individuals should receive a credit on their federal taxes, you might ask your U.S. Member of Congress to introduce legislation on that issue.

- Cosponsor existing legislation

In addition to introducing their own legislation, in most legislative organizations legislators can cosponsor or otherwise formally express support for policy changes proposed by other legislators. Having cosponsors on a bill is an important way of demonstrating that the idea is relatively non-controversial and will dramatically increase the bill's chances of eventual passage. If you're going to ask an elected official to cosponsor another's legislation, it is important to know that in cases of a "bicameral" (i.e., two house) legislature -- such as exists with most state legislatures and the U.S. Congress -- members of one house cannot cosponsor or formally endorse legislation in the other house. This means, for example, that a Member of the U.S. House cannot cosponsor Senate legislation and vice-versa.

- Vote for or against bills at various stages in the process

The act of voting is the "lifeblood" of the legislative process and of democracies in general. Legislators can introduce all the legislation they want, but in order for it to have any real impact, it will eventually need to be voted on. In fact, legislation that successfully makes it all the way through the process to become a law must be voted upon several times, usually at least once in a Committee environment and then by the entire organization.

- Interact with other branches of government on your behalf

Helping individuals understand and work through the various executive branch

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agencies is an important but often overlooked activity of the legislative branch. Executive branch agencies are the ones that implement the laws passed by the legislature. If you've ever had trouble getting your Social Security check, signing up for Medicare, or dealing with the IRS or state tax office, you know that that's not always as simple as it sounds. Fortunately, your elected officials can often help you solve individual and business problems with agencies.

At the U.S. Congressional level, for example, every Member of Congress employs staff people called "case workers." These staffers work with individuals in their district or state (in the case of the Senate) to solve individual problems, such as problems with Veterans benefits or getting disability checks. The key is to approach members of the legislature that correspond to the agency with whom you're having a problem. Members of the state legislature, for example, aren't going to be able to help you much with a federal agency like the EPA -- and Members of the U.S. Congress won't be able to do much with the state environmental agency.

Relationship Building Asks

Despite all the wonderful things your elected officials can do for you, sometimes a hard policy ask isn't quite appropriate. For example, you may be dealing with an elected official you've never talked to before or one that hasn't always been on your side of the issue. Or you might not be ready with a specific policy ask, but you want to be ready to approach the elected official when it's time. This is where a "relationship building ask" comes in handy. Some examples include:

- Site visit: Asking your elected officials to visit your office, facility, group, site or anything in the area they represent really helps generate enthusiasm for your cause. A site visit is an ideal "ask" because it gives the legislator something easy to say "yes"

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to. And then, when it comes time to make the “hard” policy ask, you will already have a positive relationship with the legislator. He or she will (hopefully) be more likely to support you.

- Community meeting: If you don't have a “site” to visit, consider asking your legislators to join you for a community meeting. If you can gather 10 to 20 like-minded constituents of an elected official in one room, he or she will almost always be willing to either attend personally or send a staff person.
- Make a public statement in support of our cause: Finally, I have some shocking information for you. Politicians like to talk. So give them something useful to talk about! Ask them to make a statement in any appropriate forum in favor of your cause or provide them with some talking points. Who knows? They might just agree to do so.

The details of how to do all this -- i.e., how to put together a site visit, a community meeting or structuring a public statement -- are covered in subsequent modules. For now, the key point is that it's essential to make an ask, even if the ask is a relatively soft “relationship building” ask.