The Politics of Public Affairs

AAPC Pacific Northwest Regional Conference | June 20, 2019

Learning how to navigate and advocate for your business clients in a contentious political environment can be challenging – but it's important. In fact, it might be as key to your success as it is to theirs. Attendees will walk away with an understanding of some of the ins-and-outs of communications strategy, advocacy successes (and failures!) and election-time crises that impact your clients, and how to work within all of these elements, to represent them well and get the win you need.

"No man should ever lose sleep over public affairs."
- Harold MacMillan

"The price of apathy towards public affairs is to be ruled by evil men."
- Plato

"Everyone has an influence on public affairs if he will take the trouble to exert it."
- Calvin Coolidge

"If once the people become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions."
- Thomas Jefferson

What is "public affairs"?

Public affairs describe the interconnected disciplines of public relations and lobbying. It combines all the tools of PR – media relations, advertising, digital communications, coalition building and grassroots organization – to achieve a specific public policy objective. Such an objective could be the passage or blockage of legislation, promulgation of a regulation or issuance of a permit. Public affairs professionals work hand-in-glove with lobbyists to build public support for their client's position. It's often said that lobbyists work inside the building (a city hall, state capital or US Capitol), while public affairs professionals work outside the building (in the media, online and on "Main Street"), creating understanding and public support for a particular public policy decision. (C*redited: Hubbell Communications, Portland, Ore*.)

This panel and memorandum are provided to give you an idea of the types of tools to have in your toolbox as you represent your public affairs clients to the best of your ability.

Advocacy Efforts

It is common for clients to assume because they have hired you to represent them in the public affairs space, that their work is done. That is not always the case. It is imperative that you understand and provide guidance to your clients on what issues *do and don't* require advocacy on their part.

- Familiarize yourself with the political playing field: which legislators/candidates are more or less likely to support legislation in the interest of your client, what their background is on the issue, how their constituents have voted on an issue, how and whether your client worked with them in the past and other information that would inform your recommendations to your client's advocacy activities.
- Implement a sophisticated advocacy tool for your clients whereas they can contact legislators or candidates quickly and with controlled, poll-tested messaging. Tools like Phone2Action, i360's iVolunteers, One-Click Politics, and more, can be an inexpensive and effective way for your clients, their employees or customers, and other stakeholders can engage.
- Identify other organizations with advocacy tools, survey research or pre-prepared messaging that may align with your clients needs, and then build the relationships to work together on an issue.
- Remember that each client may have different needs, priorities and approaches based on their issues. It is important for your client's success – and for building your public affairs business – to implement successful tactics and strategies specific to their needs. (Addendum #1)

In some cases, your clients may *feel* like they need to engage on a legislative issue, ballot measure or candidate campaign, but it may not be in their best interest. If it is not in the scope of their public affairs needs or would be detrimental to either them or the cause, make sure to discuss with your client how to approach their involvement on issues and whether advocacy is best left alone, left to lobbyists your client may hire, or whether to engage at a different time.

Building Coalitions

Your allies can be some of your best messengers. Determine in advance of a legislative session or campaign effort what other organizations and entities already exist that advocate for or against a priority issue and utilize those relationships and tools to advance and enhance your client's cause.

For example, if Legislative Pension Reform is an issue for your client, find organizations that are actively working on this issue and see if collaboration on social media, messaging, polling and sharing advocacy tools would be an option. If a fundraising apparatus already exists for a campaign effort and your client would like to financially support* a cause, work through the pre-existing effort rather than opening a new Political Action Committee or 501 (c)4.

**Make sure you are fully versed in the campaign finance laws in your state as they relate to political contributions!*

Polling Research

Survey research is a necessity in understanding both how your client's issues are best represented in a legislative or electoral atmosphere. It will help identify how to be most effective, as well as help your client understand the role they should or should not play and will serve as the foundation for building a communications strategy.

If your client will be engaged in advocacy efforts, utilize polling to:

- Understand public opinion regarding your client's issue areas as well as the political and electoral landscape;
- Inform communications and outreach strategies;
- Measure the priority issues of your client that drive support or opposition to policies, elected officials or candidates;
- Leverage polling as a platform to draw attention to your communications and advocacy efforts;
- Identify key voting blocks, segments or audiences to achieve specific goals;
- Support or oppose an issue for public debate, government hearings, position papers, stakeholder briefings and fundraising as applicable.

Media Relations

With most major news sources acting solely in the online space, and with social media serving as the most popular place for citizens to find their news, the pace of news-sharing is at an all-time high. If caught off guard, a bad headline or mis-quote can bury a client's reputation—quickly. Ensuring your clients have the tools they need for media relations is key to reputation management.

- Most news outlets will not be aware your client has a firm representing their interests so making sure your clients know how to handle media inquiries is key to crisis and reputation management.
- Provide media training for your clients, either within your own shop or bringing in a media relations specialist
- Develop a set of protocols for your clients to refer to and use in a media relations scenario (Addendum #2)
- Determine with your client in advance who the spokesperson(s) will be to represent your client's interest, being aware this may change depending on the issue.
- Have an agreement and strategy with your client on their social media presence and activity. Often, passionate clients can take to social media, as an individual, to express their opinions, comment on legislation, weigh in on campaign news, and more. This can be helpful or harmful to the client's cause.

Addendum #1: Four Examples of Successful Public Affairs Strategy
Addendum #2: Example Media Protocols for Clients and Coalitions

Addendum #1:

Four Examples of Successful Public Affairs Strategy

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Whether you're a corporation, trade association, or nonprofit, policy at both the federal and state levels can have a significant impact on your ability to succeed in your work. To make sure your organization's interests aren't left behind, it's important to have a strong public affairs strategy.

Check out four examples of organizations who have implemented key tactics that should be a part of every public affairs strategy:

1. Share Your Economic Impact with Legislators: Walmart

To build relationships with legislators, Walmart makes sure to interact with them beyond the instances when they need a favor. One way they do this is by sharing timely success stories from Walmart that impact constituents in a legislator's district.

For example, whenever Walmart opens a new store in a district, they always make sure to inform the local legislator, so they understand the magnitude of Walmart's impact on the local economy. To build further goodwill, Walmart also reaches out to legislators to share whenever the company makes a donation to a local community organization.

2. Engage Your Stakeholders: Coca-Cola

In addition to communicating your impact with elected officials, it's also important to engage and monitor your organization's stakeholders. Coca-Cola's stakeholders include community leaders and those who have received grants from Coca-Cola's Community Relations team. The Community Relations team makes sure these stakeholders are informed of company announcements, such as the roll out of a new product or the release of the Coca-Cola Super Bowl commercial, just as they would with legislators.

By keeping stakeholder information in an organized database, it's easy for the Community Relations team to organize events and invite relevant stakeholders by filtering contacts by issue area or location.

3. Track Your Interactions with Elected Officials: Retail Industry Leaders Association

When RILA needed to actively lobby around tax reform in late 2017, they were able to organize their public affairs efforts across many team members by tracking their meetings on Capitol Hill in a uniform way.

In each meeting note, RILA denoted who was in the meeting and what that member's stance was on the issue at hand. By doing so, they were able to easily see where everyone in the chamber stood on the issues they cared about and use that information to maximize their impact.

4. Integrate Grassroots Advocacy with Public Affairs: Veterans for American Ideals

VFAI cares about legislation that affects veterans and their relatives. While building relationships with legislators to impact this type of policy, the non-profit realized that veteran and family member advocates are highly effective at driving conversations. By directly calling on advocates to engage with members of Congress, VFAI is able to increase the amount of pressure they put on legislators while simultaneously making the messages they share more personal.

Key to the success of VFAI's grassroots work is having an organized database of all their advocates. This database allows them to target certain asks to different types of people based on their background or level of previous engagement.

Learn more at www.quorum.us

Addendum #2:

Example Media Protocols for Clients and Coalitions

BRIGHTER OREGON
The Oregon Business Plan Coalition

Requested Coalition Member Protocol for Responding to Media Inquiries

Brighter Oregon is the statewide Oregon Business Plan coalition. Our broad and growing coalition represents Oregon consumers, taxpayers, small and large businesses, associations and organizations from across the state who have come together to support the Oregon Business Plan framework to address the state budget's structural deficit. Key elements of the framework are:

- Continue the growth of Oregon's economy. **Growing the economy is the most reliable way to generate new revenue for public services.**
- Balance the current budget by slowing the unsustainable growth in state spending, especially overhead costs. **Our long-term budget deficits will only be fixed if lawmakers bring spending under control FIRST.**
- Make sure state spending improves outcomes. For example, compared to other states, Oregon ranks 23rd in per student K-12 education spending but 48th in graduation rates, *near dead last.* **We need to spend our tax dollars more wisely to achieve better results for Oregon students.**
- Consider new revenues only after the state's unsustainable costs are under control **and adjust taxes to provide new revenue for targeted investments that improve education and healthcare outcomes for Oregonians.**

Companies, organizations and individuals who are coalition members may receive media inquiries about the coalition or about legislative discussion of budget and revenue issues related to the Oregon Business Plan. It is very important that all coalition members follow a coordinated plan for responding to media inquiries to ensure clear and consistent messaging, and that all media responses are coordinated with or through the coalition.

The coalition has designated Mike Phillips as media contact for all media inquiries related to coalition activities. If you or your organization is contacted by the media regarding Brighter Oregon or issues related to the coalition, please forward any and all media inquiries immediately to Mike for response at **(503) 828-0941 or via Press@BrighterOregon.com.**

Mike will gather information on the specific issues the reporter is covering and will work with the coalition media team to determine the appropriate response, including coordinating with an appropriate coalition spokesperson to provide the reporter with on-the-record comments.

Please do not speak on behalf of the coalition unless you have been specifically requested to do so. In addition, if you are contacted concerning your organization's views on tax and fiscal policy issues, please contact the coalition immediately to inform us of the media inquiry.

Suggested company/organization "bridge" message to reporter inquiries:

- Our (company/organization) is part of a large and growing coalition of Oregon small and large businesses, individuals and organizations who have come together to support the continued growth of Oregon's economy and legislative efforts to contain the growth of unsustainable state budget costs.
- For more information about Brighter Oregon or the coalition, please contact Mike Phillips at (503) 828-0941.