Physician Advocacy—Three Easy Ways to Build Relationships With Your Legislators

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Want to lobby your legislators but don’t know where to start? Based on my experience as a congressional aide and, later, a lobbyist, I recommend three steps that will go a long way to building a positive relationship with politicians.

1. Meet With the Legislator’s Staff
   Establishing a relationship with a legislator’s D.C.- and district-based staff members can be a key first step in effective advocacy. They have more time to get to know you and your issues than their boss does. To some extent, they can also act as gatekeeper to the legislator.

   **District-based staff.** District-based staff—are not generally policy oriented, but building a positive relationship with them can be very useful. For instance, when D.C.-based staff get e-mails from their district-based counterparts, they tend to answer those e-mails very quickly.

   **D.C.-based staff.** Periodically, members of Congress will return to the district they represent for a “district work period,” and they will occasionally bring some of their D.C.-based policy staff. This is a great time to connect with those staff members.

2. Attend a Town Hall Meeting
   During a congressional recess, many legislators return to the districts they represent to engage with their constituents. One way they do this is via town hall meetings.

   **What to expect.** Town hall meetings are low key, and not a lot of people attend them, which makes it a good way to meet a legislator. If you plan to make comments, keep in mind that you have two audiences—the legislator and other constituents.

   **How to find out about town hall meetings.** You can contact a legislator’s staff to see when he or she will next have a town hall meeting. You also can follow legislators on social media—where many members post their plans for their next district work period—or go to their websites and sign up for their newsletters. Another option is to check the House and Senate websites to see when they are out of session, which will give you a sense of when town hall meetings might take place.

   **How to prepare.** You should explain to the legislator how your work benefits his or her constituents. To this end, you should prepare some key talking points that:

   - Define what an ophthalmologist is
   - Mention any volunteer or charity service that you provide in the community
   - Describe the challenges that your practice faces in providing care to

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3. Invite Legislators and/or Their Staff to See You in Action
The most important thing you can do to build a relationship with legislators and their staff is to arrange a site visit to your practice—don’t just tell them what you do, show them.

What to expect. If a legislator's staff members are visiting your practice, they might spend 60 to 90 minutes there, though the site visit might be shorter if a legislator is also attending.

How to prepare. At the outset, you should determine what message you are trying to convey, as this will impact some of your preparations.

• Who to invite? Will your invitation include the legislator or just staff? Will you invite more than one legislator?
• How can you sell the invitation? The invitation needs to be as compelling as possible. Suppose, for example, that your legislator is very active on education issues. In that case, highlight your pediatric services and discuss vision screening in schools.
• Who can help deliver the message? For instance, if you want to demonstrate how meaningful use regulations and the Physician Quality Reporting System are slowing down your practice, you might want your IT specialist to describe the complexities of your electronic health records and a biller or office manager to explain the administrative burden. And patients can be extremely persuasive—they can help your visitors understand that you’re not just lobbying for yourself, you’re trying to make things better for people that you and your legislator mutually serve.
• What about logistics? How will your visitors get to your office? Do they need information on parking?
• How will you record the event? Your visitors may have questions that you can’t answer right away. You’ll need to make sure you have a way of capturing those queries.
• What about the media? If you are considering inviting reporters, check with the legislator’s office first.

Relationship-building tip—Follow up. Legislators and their staff won’t be surprised if site visits are used to request their support on an issue; after all, constituents are constantly asking them for help—indeed, they get more requests than they have time to address. What’s less common is for constituents to follow up on their requests. But if you are persistent in your follow-up—