

Why retain the services of a professional governmental relations firm (a lobbyist)?

While not a formal part of state government, professional lobbyists are recognized as an important part of the governmental process. Professional lobbyists are often the most knowledgeable experts on their particular issue, and they have the political relationships and know-how to get things done. Professional lobbyists, despite the generally negative impression painted by media reports and the actions of a few, are a necessary part of the equation for governing. They often supply invaluable expertise and staff resources needed to facilitate difficult-to-understand legislation. Professional lobbyists are professional advocates. They advocate a particular viewpoint, your viewpoint, and they typically work for a certain type of client. By strongly advocating a particular industry's position, lobbyists provide vital information to legislators and officials regarding the impact on the specific constituencies they both represent. Legislators don't know the functions, or important aspects of your industry, your lobbyist does.

Lobbying is a serious business. In fact, one analyst wrote, "If you are in business in Louisiana, you may not be participating in politics, but you are involved."

One of the most important questions that you will need to consider when deciding how to approach Louisiana's legislature is whether to retain a full-time, or professional, lobbyist on your behalf. The answer to that question depends on a number of factors:

(1) Objectives

If your objective is to protect the laws allowing your industry and business to prosper in Louisiana, and your association has grown and matured to the point where it needs to have a more permanent presence in the legislature, it is in your best interest to retain a professional lobbyist. For your lobbyist to be effective, you need to work closely with them. You hire the lobbyist for their expertise in the process and their relationship; however, you are the expert in your industry and issues. Your lobbyist tells you when, where, and to whom to present your case. Another objective is to coordinate your organizations' membership into grass-roots network, and to help maintain that network. Just as important is the formation of a Political Action Committee or Pac.

(2) Financial Resources

Obviously an important question is your organization's financial capacity. Can you afford a lobbying firm? The real question may be can you afford not to have a lobbying firm? However, any costs should be weighed against both the savings in time and the potential benefits of using experienced lobbyists on your behalf. If we can all agree that time is money, then this axiom begs the question, "can your association and business both afford having you and others out of the office for long periods of time, doing the work that is required to promote change and protect your interests in the legislature? Will the time cost by missed work be more than the financial cost of hiring professionals to represent your interest?"

(3) Strategy

You must understand what you are up against. There are groups or organizations that would like to take away, or control, what you do for a living. If there is organized opposition to your proposal, then you have to make sure that you are able to withstand the pressure they might use. Furthermore, if you are in support of something, some group is against it. Therefore, it is vital you understand

how important protecting laws' affecting your industry, as well as your business, is on a daily basis. A professional lobbying firm is your eyes and ears in the State Capital while you manage your daily business.

In conclusion, retaining a lobbyist is the same as retaining an accountant or management consultant. You are retaining a professional with specialized expertise. This allows you to focus more on the overall mission of your organization and the success of your business. Most importantly, don't retain at any price a lobbyist who is not trusted and respected by the legislature. The minute you retain a lobbyist, their reputation becomes yours and retaining the services of a lobbying firm whose reputation is one of experience, integrity, and ethics with Louisiana's governmental officials makes the difference between winning and losing for your industry, your business, and your association.