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Lobbying: an art *and* a science

5 golden rules for an evidence-based lobbying strategy

In the battle for influence, public affairs professionals make crucial strategic decisions every single day. “Should we go public with this case?” “Who are we going to lobby, and how?” “Should we form a coalition with other organisations?” Public affairs professionals often make these decisions based on their experience or their gut feeling. In practice, lobbying is often more of an art than a science. It’s an intuitive and creative process, rarely involving any insights rooted in science. And yet, many public affairs professionals are faced with uncertainty about the added value of their activities. “Does what we do really matter?” “What kind of impact do we have?” “Are we making the right strategic decisions?” Some colleagues seek to compensate for these doubts with an overwhelming dose of self-confidence. An experienced lobbyist recently said during a lecture: “The day I can measure my influence is the day I can double my rates.” Other public affairs professionals are a little more modest, and try to assess their impact with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). They systematically review the lobbying tactics used. This systematic approach has gained a lot of traction in recent years. The smoky back rooms, the cigars and whisky of the past are now giving way to evidence-based lobbying, based on facts, building a bridge between the art and science of lobbying.

In recent years a great deal of academic research has been conducted into lobbying, and lobbyists can draw much inspiration from it. However, a very wide gap remains between academic research and actual practice. Evidence-based lobbying is attempting to bridge this gap by translating various scientific insights about lobbying strategies and influencing into practice. Research has shown us which strategies work well, and which tend to fall short. In addition, a large body of research has focussed on ways to measure lobbying influence. This article explains how evidence-based lobbying can strengthen your organisation, offering you five golden rules that may prove useful in your next lobbying campaign.

Rule 1: Knowledge is power

Intelligence and data are the cornerstones of evidence-based lobbying. Every lobbying communication plan should include a thorough situation analysis. Who are the most important decision-makers and stakeholders? Who are our potential friends or enemies? Do we have public opinion on our side? For every public affairs professional, the ability to collect, process and apply information is essential. At the start of every lobbying campaign, the context must be thoroughly explored. There can be no surprises. Experience, monitoring, networking and doing your own research are all crucial aspects. For instance, a recent [study](#) has shown that lobbyists on the international scene invest more than half of their time in monitoring and research.

In addition to the traditional networking and information channels, scientific databases are an undervalued source of information. Generally speaking, very few lobbyists even know they exist. There are roughly two types of scientific database. The first type maps the population of all interest groups. This type of database, similar to the European Transparency Register, provides an overview of all interest groups in, say, Belgium, the Netherlands or Europe. Such databases may also include data on financial resources, the policy domain and the type of organisation, thereby providing insight into other players in the field. How competitive is my policy domain? Who are my competitors and how are they doing financially?

A second type of database provides information about lobbying strategies and influence. The data they contain are usually drawn from interviews or surveys conducted with lobbyists. A professional activist

contacted me a few weeks ago looking for information about which political parties and lobby groups are working closely together in the Netherlands. This is something she can find out using these types of databases. Just last year, a large survey was sent out to the Dutch interest group population. These databases can shed light on the influence, strategies and inner workings of both cooperating and competing organisations. Which strategies did they use? Who is influential? How do they involve their backers? The existing scientific databases are fairly easy to consult. Just have a look at the websites of the Comparative Interest Group Survey (www.cigsurvey.eu) and the INTEREURO project (www.INTEREURO.eu).

Rule 2: Define your lobbying goals

Goals are the driving force behind every public affairs campaign. It seems obvious, but in reality this is not always the case. Public affairs professionals who don't set any specific goals in their lobbying campaign are missing out on opportunities. Moreover, different goals require different lobbying strategies. Anyone pursuing policy change must adhere to a completely different strategy than people who want to maintain the status quo. Goals provide the focus necessary to your campaign, allowing you to devise a tailor-made lobbying strategy. And afterwards, it's much easier to check whether and how the goals have been achieved. Other lobbying campaigns do have goals, but they are extremely ambitious or vague. Two years ago, I was advising a Dutch NGO. The goal of their lobbying campaign was to "eradicate world hunger by 2030". An extremely noble goal, no doubt, but far too ambitious and unrealistic. You can't really develop a tailor-made lobbying campaign for something so broad. A good rule of thumb, also frequently used in business, is to make your lobbying goals SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. These aspects can then be translated into KPIs, which are tools for following up on your objectives.

Developing an impactful lobbying strategy that also appeals to backers requires a lot of creativity. "SMART goals might be great for gaining influence, but the backers don't want that at all", one political advisor commented during a workshop. It's true that SMART goals aren't all that useful when creating catchy slogans or spectacular media campaigns. But lobbying goals are one thing, and the message you communicate is another. Your lobbying goals can be SMART and at the same time you can design slogans that appeal to your backers. However, be aware that if you involve members too heavily in the lobbying campaign, you're likely to run into difficulties. Recent [research](#) has shown that lobbying groups that give their members the right to decide end up acting more slowly on policy issues.

Rule 3: To measure is to know

Setting goals is important, but it's not enough. It's essential to check whether those goals have been achieved. But how do you do that? And what does that say about the *influence* of the lobbying campaign? More and more interest groups are using KPIs to assess their campaigns. The problem is that KPIs are often not systematically and consistently checked and tested. This is where science comes in. For years now, lobbying researchers have been using three proven methods to measure lobbying influence: process tracking, goal assessment and perceived influence. These methods are also applicable in practice.

- (1) A first method, called *process tracking*, involves the step-by-step identification of all relevant events and stakeholders in a given lobbying process. Researchers outline detailed causal relationships between lobby groups, their actions and the actual policy outcomes, based on in-depth interviews and any available written records. The result of this method is a story about influence, but a story rooted in evidence. The results are usually accurate, but this method is quite time-consuming.

- (2) A second method, called *preference attainment*, involves checking whether an organisation's goals (the KPIs) have been achieved. Although this method is cheap and simple, it doesn't reveal much about influence. For instance, a lobby group may just happen to achieve its goals through sheer coincidence, without ever really doing anything. That's why it's important to link preference attainment to the lobbying activities your organisation has actually engaged in.
- (3) A third method focusses on *perceived influence*, examining which organisations are regarded as influential. Lobbyists can assess their own influence, but also that of other organisations. This method is easy to apply, but it's based on subjective estimates. Citizens' movements, for example, tend to underestimate their impact, while the reverse applies to business interest groups. By consulting as many relevant (internal and external) colleagues as possible, you can partly neutralise these biases and errors in judgment.

In short, each method has its advantages and disadvantages. A golden rule in academic research is therefore always to combine different methods and sources. A fancy term for this is 'triangulation'. Through triangulation, you can arrive at an accurate and reliable estimate of your lobbying impact.

Rule 4: Internally compatible lobbying tactics

By combining different methods and data, researchers now have a good scientific understanding of which lobbying strategies work and which don't. Basically, two criteria are essential to any lobbying strategy: internal compatibility and external compatibility.

Internal compatibility means that the various tactical decisions in the lobbying strategy are all attuned to one another. The goals, the communication channels, the message and the target audience are all in sync. Elected politicians (target audience), for example, are more sensitive to public campaigns (channel) and politically charged slogans (message). Civil servants and administrators, on the other hand, are more open to technical and science-based arguments. Interest groups conducting a public campaign have to put forward a message that endorses the [public interest](#). When lobbying behind the scenes, it's best to use technical arguments. Different target audiences require different communication channels and messages. By taking this into careful consideration, you can strengthen your lobbying strategy.

The same goes for coalitions. [Research](#) has shown that these only make sense if a lobby group also develops a fully-fledged public campaign. Anyone lobbying behind the scenes in a coalition will likely see their chances of influencing policy diminish. Furthermore, coalitions mostly tend to strengthen the weaker partners in the alliance. A recent study shows that stronger partners have much less to gain from such forms of cooperation. And then there's the fact that a coalition of strange bedfellows, so to speak – including both civil and business interests – tends to be somewhat more influential than a coalition of the usual suspects.

Rule 5: Externally compatible lobbying tactics

Finally, [scientific research](#) shows that lobbying campaigns must be adapted to the policy context. This is called external compatibility. In order to guarantee external compatibility, extensive knowledge of the context, gained thorough preliminary research, is vital. Different issues require different lobbying strategies, depending on the context. For example, a lobby group's popularity with the general public is a decisive contextual factor. Unpopular lobby groups (e.g. tobacco or weapons lobbies) should stay behind the scenes as much as possible. Lobby groups that express popular viewpoints (such as animal rights organisations) will benefit from conducting very public campaigns. On the other hand, organisations may focus deliberately on themes that do well with the general public. For example, both

the tobacco lobby and most citizens are opposed to illegal cigarette trade. This is one of the reasons why tobacco producers concentrate their efforts on this issue. When policy debates are held behind the scenes, popularity is less of a consideration, while technical arguments, figures and detailed analyses are all the more important.

Conclusion

Can evidence-based lobbying strengthen the competitiveness of your association? Absolutely! But... there are those who remain sceptical. The added value of 'measuring influence', in particular, is still questioned by some professionals. As one consultant recently told me: "We can't very well tell our clients that we don't offer value for their money." Some professional and sector organisations share this concern, fearing the emergence of a 'no cure, no pay' attitude. However, this fear is often unjustified. Communicating about your impact to clients or members is a form of transparency. You show your true colours, and they appreciate that. You let them know where you stand and what you still have to achieve together, which fosters mutual trust and long-term customer loyalty. This is why more and more public affairs professionals are convinced of the added value of impact measurement. "Our clients specifically ask for it", a public affairs consultant recently told me during a workshop. If competing organisations have started to offer impact measurement but you haven't, it may cost you members or clients. Why not (have someone) take a close look at your lobbying practices, based on scientific insights? Through closer integration of science and practice, everybody wins. Professionals can turn scientific insights to their advantage. Academics can stay abreast of current practices and conduct more relevant research. My door is always open...

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