

Advocating in the State Capitol: More Complicated Than it Seems

THE INTRICATE AND OFTEN UNPLEASANT details of brain surgery keep it from dinner-table discussion. It's fairly messy, largely unappetizing and, for the most part, simply not interesting. Everyone knows that there are few qualified brain surgeons and almost no one attempts to impersonate one.

Politics, however, make for robust conversation. It's easy to pontificate about favorite politicians and rail against political opponents. Just by reading the Sunday paper, anyone can pretend to be president, governor, senator or a state representative. Undoubtedly, our table companions claim they can do a better job than most elected officials.

While brain surgery is a hard science, politics is an art form. Yet, politics, in general and lobbying, in particular, require a level of precision not understood by the public at large or by many of our association members.

While it's easy for our members to demand that we establish functioning and effective advocacy programs, it's harder for them to recognize the patience and workload that this entails. More fundamentally, we need to ask them, "What problem are we trying to solve?"

Often, the problem is legal and not legislative. If the law is on our side, it's time to sue, not legislate. Other times, the problem is media oriented, requiring better public relations.

When the law needs amending, it may be time to go to the Capitol. This means that your association is prepared



to participate in a highly sophisticated and ever-changing environment. The level of expertise needed to maneuver through the legislative arena may not equal brain surgery, but it can come close.

The first order of business is to assure that everyone understands their roles. While volunteers play an essential part in providing grass roots support, analyzing legislation and developing ideas, the advocacy effort should be guided by a Capitol "insider." Given the growing ranks of former legislative staffers and contract lobbyists, there should be someone to match the task and budget.

Association managers need to reconcile the legislative desires of the volunteers with the reality of the political landscape. Our members can readily shout, "There ought to be a law!" when there's an idea they'd like to see enacted or "How can they do that?" when there's a law which conflicts with their values.

The reality, of course, is much harsher.

While legislators need to have an analytical basis for their decisions, they ultimately cast their vote by weighing policy against political considerations. Understanding this delicate balance is not easily understood by reading the weekend newspaper.

Volunteers need to learn that their policy arguments may not advance in the Capitol or may get morphed into something completely different. The common political adage is that "interest groups introduce legislation in the manner which they see the world; politicians respond by showing interest groups how the world sees them."

Nonetheless, volunteers should be encouraged to organize and advocate as forcefully as possible. In this era of legislative term limits, lobbying at the district level can make the difference between success and failure. Legislators understand this and do what they can to please their constituents. They're counting on your members' support in their next campaign, whether it be for re-election to their current position or a run for a different office.

Volunteer coordinators should be established to target specific legislators

on particular bills. If your measure is coming before its first hearing in the Assembly Health Committee in two weeks, it doesn't pay to speak to all 80 assembly members. Your Capitol presence must speak with everyone on the committee in Sacramento and your volunteer coordinators should arrange concurrent district visits with the same legislators.

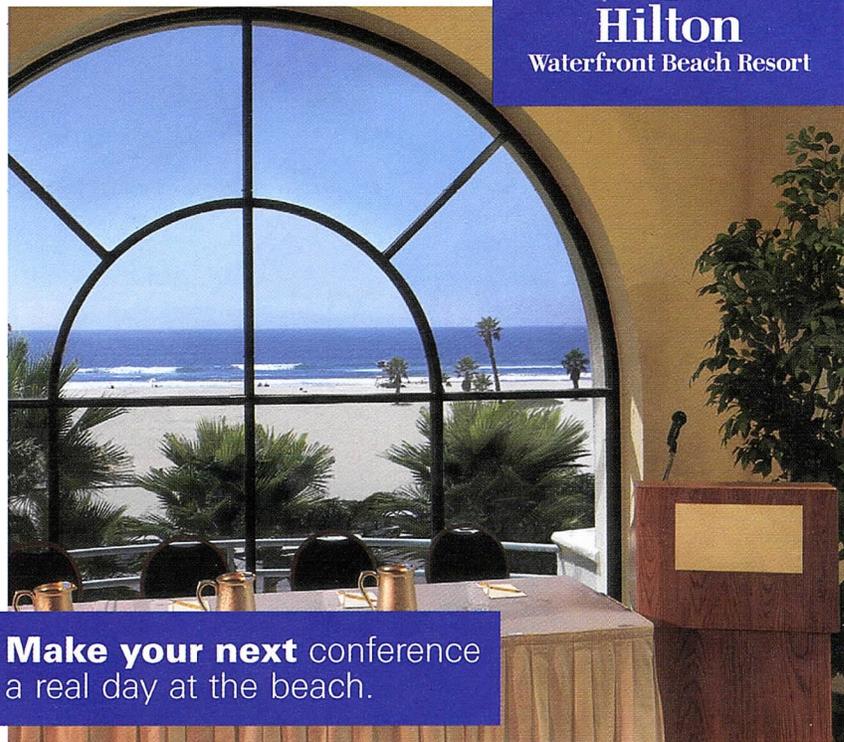
Here's a little known secret: It's often

hard to make a district appointment with a legislator during the legislative session. They're typically in their office only one-and-a-half days per week. They have many competing demands on their time. Don't despair and definitely don't delay. Instruct your volunteers to meet with a district staffer—the more junior, the better. Have them bring a critical mass of people with them, in the range of 10 to 15.

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This will produce a lengthy memo from the staffer to the legislator. I guarantee it.

With your Capitol presence and volunteer coordinators in place, there's one more piece which needs to be considered—money. While it's illegal to trade money for votes, we all know that politics is about power, and power is derived by what you bring to the table. Campaign contributions, through a professionally managed PAC, should be considered if, and only if, done correctly.

We're long past the era of having our volunteers complete and sign the myriad of governmental reporting forms associated with political contributions. If your association can't raise enough money to make meaningful contributions in addition to management fees (usually handled through an attorney or accountant) it's best not to have a PAC at all.

As you launch your advocacy program, consider the following golden rules of politics:

The Capitol is a reactive environment. Be prepared to respond at every

twist and turn. Lack of preparation or failure to respond can sink months of work.

The California Legislature represents more people than the entire country of Canada. Treat legislators with proper respect.

Your members' job is to advocate, not legislate. For example, if a legislator says that he or she can't support your \$20 million request for a budgetary increase until you answer where a corresponding amount should be cut from the budget, don't answer that question—it's a trap. Your job is to explain your proposal; it's their job to figure out how to make it happen.

Term limits have created both upheaval and opportunity. Encourage your members to run for political office. You'll never get a better advocate from the inside.

In politics, it's not who you know, but who knows you. It's relatively meaningless if you recognize your legislators in a crowded room. It's a big deal if they recognize you and even a bigger deal if they do so in a positive way.

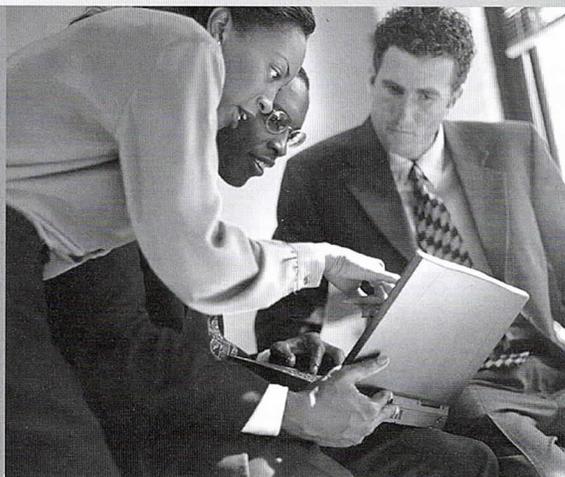
There's a final cardinal rule, which

truly distinguishes politics from brain surgery. While brain surgery is (hopefully) accomplished in one procedure, in politics "it ain't never over." Given that reality, it's time to put away the Sunday paper and get started. There's no substitute for vigilance and there's no excuse for inactivity.



Jonathan Lightman, CAE, is the executive director of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges (www.faccc.org) which the Sacramento News and Review labeled as "best political voice for community college faculty in the state." He has been a registered lobbyist for 14 years, and has advocated various causes for 25 years. He can be reached at jlfaccc@aol.com.

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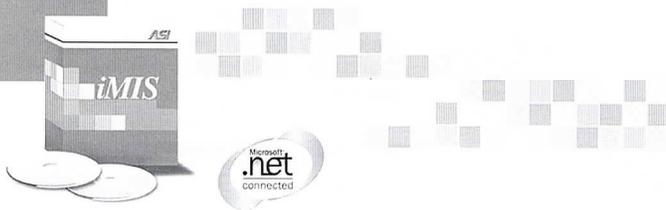


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