

BUSINESS TIPS

Government relations tips for businesses

By Chris Shultz, The Ulum Group

Is sidewalk construction making it difficult for customers to find the front door of your business? Could a change in government regulations alter your business model?

Government relations can yield big pay-offs for businesses. Smart businesses don't wait for a crisis to get to know their elected officials. They maintain relationships with politicians year-round so their first meetings don't come during heated debates.

Politicians meet with dozens of people each week, so it's a good idea to start any meeting by introducing yourself. Go into the meeting with a short agenda – no longer than 15 minutes – and make your key points up front.

Some business leaders leave a meeting thinking they have educated a politician

about an issue, only to be dismayed when that elected official later votes the “wrong” way. Make sure to ask “Will you co-sponsor House Bill 1234?” or “Will you vote to support?” the policy you are advocating.

Be careful not to mix policy and politics. Elected officials have a dual role as candidates and policy-makers. To be smart, don't talk policy at a fund-raiser and don't mention a fund-raiser in any governmental meeting.

Keeping track of who is in office, how they got there and the best ways to influence their vote can be a full-time job. Many companies outsource this function to a government relations or lobbying firm. For smaller companies, the chamber's local government affairs committee or industry associations can keep busy executives in the loop.

The Internet has made it possible to

stream government deliberations, but that's not the same as being in the room. Government relations professionals know that if your company really cares about an issue, your representative must be in the hearing room to review the amendments, see the body language and look your “yes” or “no” votes in the eye.

Even if a vote doesn't go your way, adopt a “no permanent enemies” outlook. A smart politician who votes against a business leader on one issue will be looking for another issue to agree on.

Every business is regulated. Smart businesses invest in influencing the regulations — and those who write them.

Chris Shultz is public affairs director for The Ulum Group. He works with businesses, local governments and non-profits to win in the halls of government and at the ballot box. ♦

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