

Legislators offer tips

You've been summoned to the office of a state legislator, called on the phone or asked to give testimony in a legislative committee. Palms a little sweaty? Lump in your throat? Don't be nervous. Here are some tips straight from the experts - offered by four members of the Texas Legislature during the recent Fifth Biennial Pre-Session Legislative Conference.

Dealing with legislators:

- ❑ **Be absolutely honest.** The truth is a wonderful disinfectant.
- ❑ **Respond quickly.** If a member of the legislature asks you or your staff for information, don't waste time in getting it for them.
- ❑ **Don't make excuses.** If you don't know the answer to a question or don't have the information they need, say so, and tell them you'll get back to them with that information.
- ❑ **Learn legislators' personalities.** Each one comes from a different place, has personal and professional likes and dislikes and each has his or her own philosophy. Know this information before you meet with them.
- ❑ **There should be no surprises.** Know the questions they're going to ask you so you don't get blindsided.
- ❑ **Be candid and straightforward.** They will appreciate your honesty.
- ❑ **Listen.** Your concerns are not always a concern to each legislator. Listen to the questions they ask, know their concerns.
- ❑ **Staffs are critical to the legislators – and to you.** Be up front with staff members. "If you are talking to my staff," says one legislator, "you're literally talking to me." By the same token, if a staff member asks for information, know he or she is acting on the request of the member.
- ❑ **Learn to walk and talk at the same time.** Legislators are almost always pressed for time, but they pay the same attention as they talk to you while walking down the hallway between hearings that they would if you were sitting across the desk from them. It's not disrespectful – it may be the only time you get with them.
- ❑ **Don't blindside a member.** If you know of an issue that's going to make them, your agency or the state look bad, or is cause for concern, ask for a pre-meeting briefing with the member or the member's staff. Members don't like surprises either.
- ❑ **Train all the way down.** Don't make your staff scared of a legislator who might ask them a question. Make sure all your staff can respond to legislators' requests – and if they don't have the answers, they should say so and refer the member or member's staff to someone who does.

Dealing with committees:

- ❑ **No “death by PowerPoint.”** It’s a much-used, and often over-used, presentation tool. If you use PowerPoint, remember to give members handouts as well.
- ❑ **Have the right person present.** Sometimes the person at your entity with the most knowledge about your presentation is not the best speaker - or your best speaker is not always the most knowledgeable about your issue. Find a balance.
- ❑ **Have good, simplistic handouts.** Keep it simple – highlight areas that are important. Fill in around the handout information with your oral presentation. Hit the high points – the “meat” of your presentation should have already been vetted in one-on-one meetings with the members or their staff.
- ❑ **Give copies of your handouts to the committee clerk.** Be sure you have enough copies for all members of the committee and for the clerk and make sure the clerk has them before your testimony.
- ❑ **Take notice of members who leave the committee.** They may be headed to other committee hearings being held at the same time. Make sure they get copies of your handouts and arrange to brief them or their staff later.
- ❑ **Know which committee members are familiar with your issues.** Expect to field tough questions from them. Be ready to respond.
- ❑ **Do your homework.** If a member has a full-time job in his or her district, you might want to plan a trip there to speak with them. Don’t take a chance on “hoping” to get to talk to them during the rapid-fire 140 days of a legislative session.
- ❑ **Be neutral.** Furnish the information asked for, but don’t advocate. Be very careful about borderline lobbying.
- ❑ **Don’t lose your credibility.** One mistake, one false step, one incidence of being less than honest and upfront with a member could be costly for you - not only today, but also in the future. Members have long memories.
- ❑ **Two’s company; three’s a crowd.** Two members alone and speaking to each other generally means they are talking business. Don’t interrupt them.
- ❑ **The House and Senate are not the same.** Be aware of the different deadlines in the House and Senate, as well as the differences in House and Senate rules and protocol.