

POLITICS IN MINNESOTA

What makes a good lobbyist?

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Andy Kozak of North State Advisors and Maryann Campo of Lobby Minnesota are two of the 1,200 to 1,300 lobbyists at the Capitol. Organizations spend about \$60 million annually on lobbying, according to the Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Be ready to talk, and don't be a wallflower

As the Legislature begins work again next year a constant presence will be lobbyists. Condemned, reviled, lambasted and occasionally crucified, lobbyists see themselves as a key component in the democratic process, the paid and unpaid petitioners to legislators and the governor.

Lobbying is no small industry in Minnesota. There are roughly six lobbyists for every legislator, or around 1,200 to 1,300 plying the halls of the Capitol. Organizations spend \$59 million to \$62 million annually on lobbying, according to the Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board.

With that in mind, what makes a good lobbyist?

Capitol Report spoke to several veteran lobbyists about their jobs and what essentially makes them good at what they do. Not surprisingly, they are the antithesis of shrinking violets, each possessing an enormous gift for gab.

Key personal characteristics

Several traits emerge in speaking to lobbyists who have been in the game a while. It requires a certain fearless personality, the patience to wait a long time for a few minutes of a legislator's time and the ability to suffer defeat without threatening anyone bodily harm.

"You have to be able to speak to anyone," says Maryann Campo of Lobby Minnesota. "You have to have that kind of confidence in yourself — I've never met a king or queen, but I would go right up to them and speak to them if I had the chance."

Bill Strusinski, a 40-year veteran of lobbying, works for service-related nonprofits, including the Friends of Minnesota Public Television. "You have to be a really nice person and friendly," he says.

Veteran lobbyist Andy Kozak, a principal with North State Advisors, represents Indian tribes, AT&T, Ameriprise and Flint Hills, among others. A lobbyist "needs a temperament that's not too judgmental; you have to be tolerant and have empathy for legislators," he suggested. "You have to be able to handle conflicting emotions and ideas while striking a balance. A lobbyist has to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty while possessing patience."

Sometimes lobbyists are charged with being dishonest, but nearly all of them say that if they lie they get booted out of the very tight legislative club. "You have to be honest," says Susan Stout, a 22-year veteran of the Legislature who has represented nurses and hospital associations. "The Capitol is a small place, and if you're loose with the facts it doesn't take long for the circle to close."

Frank Ongaro, executive director of Mining Minnesota, has worked in the past for labor, industry and the city of St. Paul. Lobbyists have to have "credibility and be straightforward, honest and willing to argue why their perspective is the best perspective for the state of Minnesota," he says. "You have to continually build credibility as a good provider of information."

In fact, maintaining the client's message with clarity is a key component of the job. "You have to be explaining your position all the time consistently, and succinctly," Campo says. "I don't take any more time than I have to."

The skill in positioning is tested in rapid-fire encounters that occur when legislators drop out of a committee hearing or session or in a five- or 10-minute meeting. A 10-minute encounter would only happen "if you're lucky," Kozak says.

Strusinski likes to tell legislators what the opposition is saying before arguing his client's point of view — and why it is stronger. "You have to tell the whole story," he says.

Kozak adds: “You have to be able to grasp issues and the details of those issues. You’re in essence an intermediary between the Legislature and the client, explaining to the client what is possible and explaining to the Legislature what the client wants.”

The role of the lobbyist in knocking on doors and chasing legislators down the halls of Capitol is just part of any strategy today, Strusinski says. After the gift ban passed in the mid-1990s, and lobbyists could no longer get things done by simply speaking to committee chairs and then rewarding their fealty with fishing and hunting trips, the rise of grass-roots communications took hold, he noted.

Part of any strategy is for people who passionately support or oppose an issue to flood their hometown legislators with emails, letters and calls. “Most legislators pay attention to the people from their districts,” he says. “A lot of them seem to know everyone from their district.”

Stout spent several years explaining to legislators that severe health care cuts would reduce federal matching dollars in the complex formulas of that industry. But the pressure really kicked in, she says, when hospital administrators enlisted the support of their thousands of employees to flood legislators with calls and emails.

“A good grass-roots operation with letters from back home can trump the best lobbyists,” adds Kozak, who has been in more than a few grass-roots efforts on behalf of Indian tribes to thwart the spread of state-sponsored gambling.

Understanding government

Many lobbyists have a background in government. Kocak, Onargo and Strusinski worked for different governors early in their careers. Campo operated two businesses before becoming active in the early 1990s in liberal Republican politics when the GOP still had liberals. Stout was a registered nurse and politically involved before becoming a lobbyist. Today, she is the chief communications officer of the Amputee Coalition.

Government experience is essential to serving clients. Lobbyists have to “be an expert in the legislative process,” be able to make presentations before committees and draft bills, Strusinski noted. They have to understand the committee structure and the “individual dynamics of legislators and their districts,” he says. “You don’t want them to get at cross ways with their constituents.”

Having “empathy” for legislators and the tough decisions they have to make is part of the job, too, Kozak says. The key for a lobbyist might be to help clients and legislators create a compromise bill. “Most people want to be fair, so you have to get them to sit down with you and figure out ways it (legislation) might work. You have to have flexibility and be creative.”

Lobbyists also have to be honest with their clients. Many bills take years to pass. Sometimes clients receive advice from their national counterparts that is bad or ineffective.

“I won’t let a client commit suicide,” Campo says. “I’ve had to tell clients you are not going to prevail unless you do things the way I think they need to be done.”

Lots of war stories

Every lobbyist has war stories, not all ending in triumph. Campo worked with the Minnesota Association of Naturopathic Physicians to create a state registry of practitioners in 2008. The organization received misguided advice from the national association. Among radio stations were inundated with false ads saying the registry would somehow prohibit the community’s religious practices.

Some legislators claimed the bill would require the owners of vitamin stores to register or close. The law passed but not without a mighty struggle. “Lobbying is a contact sport,” Campo says.

Ongaro recalled a bill he helped push through both chambers dealing with telecommunications and safety in 1990s, only to have then-Gov. Arne Carlson veto it. “We did everything we were supposed to get it over the finish line,” he says. “We went through every scenario and covered every base. Sometimes it doesn’t turn out the way you expected and you lose one.”

When Gov. Jesse Ventura vetoed a bill funding the conversion of public television stations from analog to digital he suffered his first override, Strusinski says. Working with his client, he marshaled support from rural and urban viewers of the six-station network to pressure legislators to override Ventura’s veto.

Kozak was involved in a major effort to save the Minnesota Timberwolves in the 1990s through a buyout of the Target Center by the city of Minneapolis and the Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission. A Democrat, Kozak is not wary of controversial issues, once working with tobacco companies to fight higher taxes on cigarettes because they hurt the majority of smokers, who happen to have low incomes.

Advice for newcomers

Even lobbyists concede they did not ever dream of becoming one. They fell in love with being at the Capitol and in the process of legislation. Many lobbyists — but certainly not all — have a law degree. Others learned while working as government employees.

“There is no school for lobbyists,” says Stout, who learned by being politically active before becoming a lobbyist. As Kozak says, most lobbyists “fall into the profession” almost by chance.

Earlier in her career Stout recalled seeing around the Capitol Sue Rockne, a legendary pro-choice advocate. She jokingly asked Stout near the end of a legislative session, “Are you coming back next year?” Stout says yes. Rockne smiled, and replied, “We got you!”