Fast Track to Effective Lobbying

White Paper by Dr Ilia Bider of IbisSoft (www.ibissoft.se)

Abstract. At a time of growing individualism, many interest organizations, such as trade unions, political parties, etc., find it difficult to attract new members. One of the reasons for this phenomenon lies in the fact that these organizations are too anonymous outside their own circles, which makes it difficult for potential members to understand the value of formally joining the organization. The goal of an interest organization is to guard the interests of its members. It fulfills this goal by (a) giving legal and practical advice to its members, (b) conducting negotiations on the members' behalf, and (c) trying to influence decisions of the authorities in the favor of the members. While the first two activities are conducted in a business-like manner, the third activity, lobbying, is often conducted on a case-to-case basis without a proper structure and ineffectively. The first two activities have internal nature and they are not seen much outside the organization boundaries. The third activity is directed outwards and it has the greatest importance for creating a strong positive image of the organization. Therefore, it is most unfortunate that many organizations have this activity poorly organized. To help interest organizations to "industrialize" their lobbying activities, we worked out a concept of "fast track to effective lobbying". Some hints about the concept of "fast track" are given in the text below. However, according to the Russian saying "It's better once to see than hundred times to hear", therefore we ask you for an opportunity to present the concept for you in person.

Motivation

Interest groups, such as association of employees, employers, pensioners, tenants, play an important role in the today's democratic society. A formally organized interest group, e.g., a trade union, often has a central and local offices the task of which is to guard the interests of the given group's members. This is done in a number of areas, such as

- Giving legal and practical advice to its members.
- Conducting negotiation on behalf of its members, e.g. negotiation that concern wages, rents, working conditions, etc.
- Influencing decisions made by authorities on the local, national, or international levels - lobbying.

Two first activities are normally conducted in a business-like manner. For example, when a member of an interest group contacts its office for an advice, he/she is instantly redirected to the right officer who is an expert in the matter. The officer asks a number of questions to clarify the situation and in many standard situations can give an appropriate advice promptly. The same is true for negotiations. When the time comes, or circumstances require a new round of negotiations, the office workers know exactly how to start negotiations, and how to proceed with conducting them.

As far as lobbying is concerned, very few offices have standard routines to handle this activity. As a result, when information on a new legislation that touches the interests of the group comes there is no clear plan how to opposed or promote this legislation. A strategy and tactics to deal with lobbying is often reinvented on a case-to-case basis. In addition, the following problems are often encountered:

- Information on a decision came too late (the decision has already been approved).
- The interest group has no channels to exercise its influence on the decision maker.
- There are too few person experienced in lobbying, and they do not have time to work with all decisions that touch the interests of the given group.
- Information on the previous cases of lobbying, successful as well as unsuccessful is not readily available. In the best case, it sits in the heads of the few experts who worked on these cases. Such information is easily lost when these persons quit or retire.

The lobbying activity is at least as important as advising and negotiation. Actually, lobbying is more important than the other two activities because it is directed outwards, and it helps to promote a strong positive image of the interest group. A positive image in turn can attract new members to the organization, a task that becomes more complicated at the time of growing individualism. To make lobbying effective, it should be converted into a business-like activity of the same kind as advising, and negotiation. Continue working on a case-to-case basis may easily result into slipping from serious actions into a propaganda campaign, which can only damage the image of the interest group.

To "industrialize" the lobbying activity, we in cooperation with one of our customers, have made a detailed analysis of this activity and came up with recommendations outlined in the sections below.

Have a program and introduce monitoring

A lobbying case may be initiated in two ways, actively, and passively:

- Active initiation means that the organization decides on it's own to persuade an authority to make a decision that lies in the interests of the group's members.
- Passive initiation means that information has been received about a new decision planned, under discussion, or already taken. The decision has a potential to affect the interests of the members (positively, or negatively), thus the organization needs to oppose to or support the initiative.

Active initiation requires that the organization has a program and policies on how to achieve the program's objectives. From this program, the organization should periodically derive the needs for new legislative or administrative decisions.

For passive initiation to be effective, information on planned decisions should be received on the early stages of the decision-making. Establishing some monitoring processes that actively gather information on possible decisions that might affect the group interests can help for this end. Following monitoring processes could be useful:

- Media monitoring.

- Monitoring of official reports on all levels.
- Maintenance of contacts with representatives of various authorities on all levels.

Work out parameters to analyze each decision

Each potential lobbying case coming from the monitoring process, or initiated actively should be analyzed before deciding on the reaction (e.g. oppose, or promote the decision), as well as on the strategy and tactics of a lobbying campaign. To make analysis in the business-like manner, a number of parameters should be worked out to go through for each new lobbying case. Some parameters are of external nature, and they are more or less common for many interest groups:

- Level of decision: international, national, municipality, company
- Type of decision-making organ
- The area to which the decision in question is related: economy, democratic rights, etc.
- The status of the decision-making: planned, under discussion, made, implemented, etc.
- Chances of success to influence the decision in the given direction

The specific parameters concern the ways a decision may affect the interests of the group. These parameters depend on the nature of the group. It may be: standard of living, wages, taxation, etc. For each parameter an evaluation should be made of how this parameter will be affected by the decision under investigation: whether its value would go up or down, and if possible, how much. The evaluation should be supported by some argumentation, e.g., past experience, theoretical doctrines, etc. This kind of argumentation can be very useful when trying to influence the decision in the chosen direction, or create public opinion.

Analysis according to the specific parameters helps to decide on the course of actions, i.e. to oppose the decision, support it, seek a compromise, or take no action (if the decision does not touch the interests of the group). Analysis according to the general parameters helps to decide on strategy and tactics, i.e. what channels for influence to use and in what way.

Have channels to ensure backing from own members and other groups

If the decision that the organization wants to influence is of a major importance, and/or the lobbying campaign might require significant resources, a support from the own members, and potentially other groups should be secured before starting the campaign. For this end, the organization needs fast channel of communication with its own members and members of other groups. The communication can be completed through mailing lists, email, web site, organization’s own newspaper, or local and central press.

The communication channels should be two-way. First, the nature of decision, how it affects the members’ interests, and what organization decided to do about it should be explained. Information gathered during the analysis phase could help for this end. Second, an opinion of its own members, and (possibly) members of other groups should be gathered. The latter can be done through a questionary, or an opinion poll completed by some commercial organization.

Have effective channels to influence decision-makers

After the main course of action has been chosen and support of the members has been secured, a strategy and tactics of a lobbying campaign could be designed. The strategy prescribes what channels to use when influencing the decision-maker(s), and in what order. The tactics is about how to use each channel.

The channels for influence are chosen according to the type of the decision-making organ. Roughly, all channels to the decision-maker(s) can be divided into two groups: direct channels and indirect channels. As a direct channel, we consider a person, or a group connected to the organization that is participating in the decision-making, e.g., a member of the parliament, a high-level employee of the local authority, etc. By communicating with such a person in a chosen way (tactics), the group may affect the decision directly. Examples of tactics for direct channels are: inform about consequences (pretty neutral), ensure support, threaten, or search a compromise.

Indirect channels should lead to organizations that are not making the decision, but have some influence on the decision-maker(s). The most important indirect channels are the ones that lead to mass media, e.g., daily press, weekly magazines, TV, and radio programs, etc. Examples of tactics for mass media channels: inform wide public about the decision, initiate a debate, build up public opinion, and provoke the decision maker(s) to answer difficult questions.

Other indirect channels may lead to local, national, or international authorities that have some power to stop or promote the decision. Examples of tactics for such channels are: inform about the decision and its consequences, get support, and pursue to take actions.

One of the most powerful indirect channels when the organization opposes the decision is a court; which court to choose depends on the country, and the matter of decision. Going to the court may have other goals than just stopping a particular decision. For example, it might be creating a precedent that can prevent all decisions of the kind. Another alternative is to show to the lawmakers, e.g., members of parliament, that some law does not work, or there is a hole in the law system. The latter goal may be pursued even if there are no chances to win the case in the court.

Creating effective channels for influencing various decision-makers requires time, which mean that it might be too late to start this work when a particular lobbying case is under consideration. A network of contacts on various levels should be created and maintained not only during various lobbying cases, but also in between them.

Constantly reevaluate the results of influence

Following the chosen for a given channel tactics means completing one or more acts of communication with the person(s) who represent this channel. Communication may be oral, e.g., meeting, press conference, phone conversation, etc., or written, e.g., fax, mail, email, etc. After all communication activities via the channel have been completed, the result achieved should be understood: whether the tactical goal has been reached or not. By constant evaluation of the results, the overall strategy may be revised, new channels may be tried, or the already chosen tactics may be changed for some of the channels.

Have effective bookkeeping

During the communication through the channels, a lot of messages would be sent and received. It is important to keep track of such messages, and have operational procedures in place for reviewing them. This can help when writing the answers, revising the strategy, etc. If the bookkeeping works properly, the documents can also be reused, i.e., a document prepared for communication via one channel may be resent via other channels. Moreover, an effective bookkeeping can help to save the experience obtained in each lobbying case and make it possible to analyze and use this experience in the future lobbying cases.

How to proceed

Summarizing the above, the following measures can help in making the lobbying process effective:

- Have a clearly-defined program of what the union wants to achieve, and how (for active initiation of lobbying processes).
- Have monitoring processes that deliver information about planned decisions on the early stages of decision-making (for passive initiation of lobbying processes)
- Have a clear understanding of different levels of decisions.
- Have a number of parameters for carrying out the consequence analysis.
- Have effective channels of two-ways communication with its own members
- Have a network of contacts on various levels that can function as channels during the lobbying process. Introduction of a special process for contact maintenance may help for this end.
- Have routines for keeping track of all activities planned and completed for various channels.

An introduction of a "business-like" lobbying can be easier achieved with the help of a specially designed IT system. Based on the analysis outlined in this document we have designed and implemented a specialized system called *i*Focus that facilitates structuring the lobbying process, helps in executing its various steps, and automatically does all bookkeeping required. *i*Focus also facilitates information sharing between all persons engaged in various lobbying cases, and it helps to attach to the process less experience staff who can immediately start learning the process via "doing by example".

For more information on *i*Focus and our other products and services, please contact IbisSoft at *info@ibissoft.se.*

Short information about the company: IbisSoft (www.ibissoft.se) is a consulting company based in Stockholm, Sweden. It specializes in the borderland between Management and IT, the main focus being on organization of operative work in non-manufacturing business processes.

Short bio of the author: Dr. Ilia Bider (ilia@ibissoft.se) is a cofounder and Director R&D of IbisSoft. He has MS in Electronic Engineering and PhD in Computer and System Sciences, and combined experience of 30 years of research (in the fields of business modeling, computational linguistics, databases), and practical work (business analysis, and software design, coding, sales, and marketing) in five countries (Norway, Russia, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States). Dr. Bider has published over 25 research papers as well as a number of articles for practitioners. His main specialty is finding research topics in his business practice, and testing research results in the business practice. Dr. Bider is an inventor of the state-oriented approach to business process modeling that is based on the application of the conceptual ideas of the Mathematical system theory to the realm of business processes. This approach has been successfully tested in business analysis and application development practice of IbisSoft and its partners. Dr. Bider puts a lot of effort in bridging the gap between the academics and practitioners. He co-founded a series of international workshops on business process modeling where both academics and practitioners meet for fruitful discussions. He holds tutorials at international conferences to highlight the needs of practitioners for academic public. He sits on the editorial board of the Business Process Management Journal as a representative for practitioners.