

# **Government Relations for Canadian Associations**

**How to Be the Voice of Your Members with Government**

Huw Williams

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## Preface

I have worked in the most senior levels of government in several jurisdictions, and seen lobbying at its worst and at its best. I have seen hit-and-run lobbying that fails because it lacks basic follow-up. I have seen lobbyists who are rude and ill-informed and do more harm than good to their members. On the positive side, I have seen the most effective association lobbyists become invaluable resources on tough policy issues.

I have also worked as the in-house government relations director for one of Canada's largest associations, so I know the pressures and demands placed on association staff and understand the complexities of board dynamics. Most recently, I spent the last 15 years as a consultant to a wide variety of Canada's leading associations.

This book, therefore, represents the combined experience of numerous associations that embarked on a wide variety of advocacy campaigns at all levels of government. The backbone of this project is the analysis of these efforts—and the distillation of practices and approaches that work and, of course, of those that do not work.

Many well-respected association board members and senior staff members were interviewed for this project. Their wisdom and knowledge proved invaluable in preparing this book.

Huw Williams

## **Who This Book is For**

This book is designed for association staff and board members who need to engage government to resolve member issues. The objective is to provide readers with a simple, straightforward understanding of how to achieve results when dealing with government.

The predominant viewpoint of this book is that a proactive and well thought-out government relations strategy best serves the needs of association members. A fundamental principle for any association to be successful in dealing with government is to develop relationships with policymakers before a crisis takes place.

As I hope to demonstrate, the best advocacy approach involves educating and sensitizing decision makers over time. Associations are strongly advised to position themselves as a resource to government policy decision makers. This single action ensures long-term success in the government relations arena. This is a book of action, not a civics guide to government. It is a tactical guide for achieving association lobby goals—at all levels of Canadian government relations. It provides a road map for association staff and board members starting out in government relations and an insight for experienced professionals to take their efforts to a higher level.

## About the New Edition

This book is a new and refocused edition of my earlier book with CSAE, *A Guide to Government Relations for Directors of Not-for-Profit Organizations*. A fresh look is needed now for several reasons.

First, the political atmosphere surrounding lobbying has changed radically over the last decade.

Governments now demand full transparency of lobbying objectives and activities. There is increasing scepticism among elected politicians that lobbyists are credible and legitimate. More and more elected leaders question whether associations are trustworthy participants in the legislative process.

Understanding this dynamic and overcoming it with best practices is an important objective of this work.

Second, the rules governing lobbying have tightened significantly at all levels of government. This book aims to underscore the importance of understanding and following those rules, and it highlights proper lobby registration conduct as a core new responsibility for association staff and the senior staff officers.

Third, rapidly evolving technology has made a huge impact on shaping public policy. Researching government policy, posting association advocacy positions, and mobilizing members can happen much faster and the implications for association advocacy are huge.

Finally, the advocacy environment has become more competitive than ever. Gaining and maintaining the attention of decision makers is more difficult than ever. Associations that do not follow a proactive and well-guided approach to government relations risk being left behind. This book attempts to ensure its readers are on the cutting edge of lobbying, and can break through the clutter and deliver their members' message with success.

Since the last edition there have been major changes in the Canadian government relations world. These changes influence almost every aspect of how associations lobby government. Legislative and regulatory initiatives have spearheaded changes that require greater transparency for associations working with government. This book covers the new world of lobbying rules that require associations not only to disclose what they lobby for, but also to whom, when, and how they lobby. These rule changes are critical for association staff and board members to understand. These rule changes have had an impact on the perception of lobbying and have sometimes made it more difficult to reach decision makers. As a result, sound and creative advocacy strategies are needed now more than ever. This book elaborates in greater detail the principles for lobbying success and case studies of association victories. Finally, rapidly changing online advances are continuing to shape how advocacy and indeed how democracies work. Advocacy and the online world are in this new edition.



## Introduction

Associations form to enable individuals, or similar businesses, to achieve common goals. Government relations activities undertaken by associations provide members with a greater voice in government decision making and ultimately protect member interests. When dealing with the increasingly complex world of government regulation and legislation, it makes sense that collective action has a far greater chance of getting tangible results.

Historically, many associations were formed to deal primarily with advocacy issues. However, many more associations have taken on government relations responsibilities as the ever-increasing reach of government affects the concerns of individuals and not-for-profit organizations. Whether the purpose of the association is to represent individuals, professionals, or business-based concerns, a formal government relations approach is more necessary than ever.

Canadian association research demonstrates that government relations is the most important activity for most membership-based organizations. Indeed, over 90 percent of Canadian associations are engaged in government relations at some level. Yet research on the subject also reveals that associations do not commit enough resources to fulfilling this mandate, and in many cases associations have not determined the best approach to achieve success.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this book is to help association executives and board members better understand the elements necessary to achieve success in government relations.

## Government Relations in Three Parts

Part one, “Preparing Your Association,” covers the elements that make a good advocacy foundation for any association. It covers the important rules and regulations that govern modern day lobbying. It highlights the critical senior staff responsibility and accountability for lobbying registration and disclosure. This part also sets the foundations for good strategic advocacy planning.

Part two is “Delivering Your Message.” This part provides insight into working with senior government officials and their elected counterparts. Insight into how political offices are staffed and what approaches work best is outlined. It also highlights how to deal with important legislative committees.

Finally, part three, “Completing the Advocacy Picture” looks at the remaining pieces of a successful advocacy campaign. A separate chapter on media and its impact on the political process, and one on the

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<sup>1</sup> Belfall, Donald, *Associations in Canada, Future Impact and Influence*, Toronto, ON -- Foundation for Association Research and Education, 1995.

importance of grassroots advocacy are in this section. Issues around conducting research, forming coalitions, and working with a minority government are examined.

## **Government Relations, Lobbying and Advocacy: Do They Mean the Same?**

Yes and no. Throughout this book the terms will be used interchangeably in much the same way those in the government relations profession do on a day-to-day basis. However, you should remember that lobbying is a loaded word, with connotations of too much influence or pressure. Advocacy is often used in its place because it conveys a more subtle and sometimes softer means of changing government policy.

## **Associations and Government**

Government officials and politicians generally have limited working knowledge of, or practical experience with, the industries for which they develop policy. Too often association members assume that their working world is well understood by outsiders and more particularly by the policy makers that govern them. This is a dangerous assumption.

Compounding this dilemma, the current political landscape has thousands of interest groups competing for limited government resources; decision makers are constantly shifting their focus from one issue to another. Interest groups need to be more proactive to gain government attention or they risk being marginalized.

In establishing a government relations program, by their very nature associations are uniquely positioned for three reasons:

1. They can draw on the practical expertise of the board and membership.
2. They can effectively focus discussions and policy debate with governments—it is easier to speak with and negotiate with one association rather than multiple individuals.
3. They tend to have a broad, grassroots membership base to which governments are prone to listen.

The larger the association constituency the harder it is to ignore. As a result, associations are well positioned to be very effective at government relations. They have the wisdom and experience of many successful managers, and they have the members to execute the message.

From a government's perspective, associations bring a multitude of benefits: it is easier to communicate with one association than a hundred individual members; associations can help build consensus;

associations can provide governments with practical experiences and advice; and associations can provide a cost-effective partnership for administering government policy.

However, associations must understand the motivations and constraints of government, and always consider the government's own agenda when embarking on an advocacy activity. Successful government relations strategies fit into the government's agenda or find arguments that support major policy pronouncements, such as the Speech from the Throne, budgets, and major policy papers. Associations must also understand the plans and priorities of various government departments to be successful in advancing an advocacy agenda. Advocacy efforts that are closely aligned with the government's own agenda are most likely to succeed.

## **The Role of the Association Senior Staff**

Government relations facilitates a two-way dialogue between an organization and a level of government. The role of association management is to examine what is happening in and around government, communicate that to the membership, and counsel the board on how to respond. The association's role is then to take the industry back to government.

It is important for associations to consider the assignment of responsibility for government relations activities. Overall, experience with Canadian associations demonstrates that about 40 percent of associations have full-time government relations staff. Larger associations have assigned staff to manage government relations; however, smaller groups tend not to have the financial resources to employ a dedicated government relations manager.

One of the most fundamental decisions an association must make is the extent to which government relations responsibilities are assigned to the association's senior staff officer. Based on my experience, there is a continuing trend among Canadian associations to ensure that the most senior association staff officer maintain primary responsibility for government relations.

In these cases, the association's Chief Staff Officer (CSO) serves as the voice of the association to government and maintains overall strategic responsibility for directing the association's advocacy efforts. This trend holds true even among those associations with assigned full-time government relations staff. The principle behind this trend is the increasing realization of the importance of advocacy to association members. My experience has demonstrated that associations are more successful at advocacy when the CSO remains directly engaged in government relations.

[catch: trench tip]

### ***Tip from the Trenches: Chief Staff Officer Involvement***

Randy Williams, President of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, and a frequent public speaker on association leadership, highlights the importance of the CSO taking an active role in government relations: “Association CEOs cannot remove themselves from advocacy planning and implementation. Most association members place a great deal of emphasis on government relations issues and they expect senior level attention, decision making and focus on advocacy. Even if your organization has senior government relations staff, the CEO must take a leadership role and be directly involved in advocacy.”

[catch: end trench tip]

## About the Author

Huw Williams is the President of Impact Public Affairs and is a nationally recognized expert on advocacy and strategic communications for not-for-profit associations and industry trade groups. He is a trusted advisor to scores of leading national and provincial associations, helping them achieve their government relations and public affairs objectives. Williams' advocacy and communications expertise are based on solid practical experience. Prior to forming Impact Public Affairs, Williams was the Director of Public Affairs for a national industry association. Williams also served in several senior roles advisory roles for leading cabinet ministers. In 2006, Mr. Williams was recognized by the Ottawa Business Journal with the "Top Forty Under Forty Award" for professional success and community involvement. In 2009, he was named one of Canada's "Top 100 Lobbyists" by the Hill Times newspaper. In 2010, Williams received CSAE's Griner Award for business excellence in the association sector. Mr. Williams holds a Masters of Business Administration from the University of Ottawa and a Bachelor of Arts (Political Science) from the University of Calgary. He has also completed studies at the Université de Tours in France.