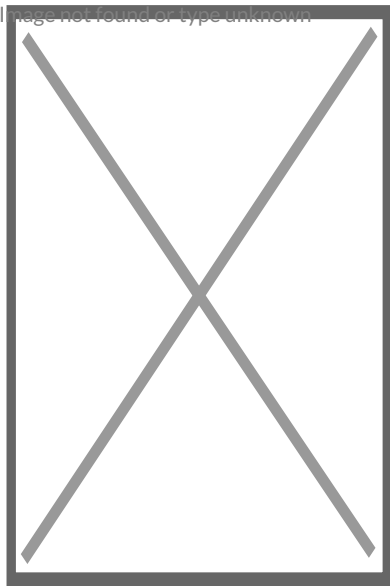


Lobbying on the Local Level: Tips for Small Businesses



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Special to *Business in Savannah*

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, lobbying spending has more than doubled since 1998, going from \$1.45 billion to \$3.22 billion in 2015. Last year's top five spenders nationally included the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (\$84 million), the National Association of Realtors (\$37 million), Blue Cross/Blue Shield (\$23 million), the American Medical Association (\$22 million) and Boeing (\$22 million).

In an election year, lobbying is top of mind for many large trade associations and corporations, especially when it comes to those big picture issues such as health care, taxes and regulations. As a small business owner, it may seem impossible for you to have input on pending legislation that is important to your industry; however, with some thought and strategic guidance, it is fairly easy to make your mark.

The first step is to educate yourself. Know what legislation could potentially impact your business. Familiarize yourself with what district your business is located in and get to know the appropriate state, county and city leaders — all the way from the governor and your legislators in Atlanta, to the mayor, to county commissioners, to city council members. Attend meet and greet sessions with your elected officials and write them when you have a business concern.

In addition, identify what existing trade or professional organization represents you and your business interests and become a member. The National Federation of Independent Business, for example, is an association dedicated to promoting and growing small businesses. It provides business advice and state and federal advocacy services to more than 325,000 business owners across a range of industries. However, if you need something more specific to your industry, the organization probably exists at both the state and national level, whether you're an architect, an aeronautic engineer, or an auto dealer.

Finally, if your needs are more complex, consider hiring a contract lobbyist. When the legislature is in session, there are nearly 1,500 lobbyists in Atlanta representing their clients' interests, whether it's a school, church, retail business or corporation. Professional lobbyists understand the complexities of the legislation process and have expertise in city councils, county commissions, state legislatures and local regulatory agencies. They know who to talk to and how to present an effective argument, but beware of those who promise a certain outcome. In fact, state law prohibits lobbyists from charging contingent fees based on whether or not a certain outcome is achieved.

You don't need to spend millions of dollars or be a big corporation to have a voice in government. You can achieve impressive results simply by engaging your local elected officials, leveraging membership in trade organizations, and, when necessary, bringing a professional lobbyist on board to represent your business's concerns.

Although most businesses in America are small, their economic impact is anything but. According to Forbes, they account for anywhere between 60 and 80 percent of all U.S. jobs and produce 13 times more patents than larger firms. It is imperative, then, that they effectively tell their story to those making the legislative decisions on resources small businesses need to grow and succeed.

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