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Let's Talk Tech: Maintaining Relationships with Legislators

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



If you know me, you know I love to talk tech — and in fact, I've made a career of it. Recently, however, I've branched out to discussing cutting-edge technology with legislators. In a previous article, I discussed my experience of working with Blockchain Advocacy Coalition to explain blockchain, smart contracts, and cryptocurrency to California policymakers, regulators, and legislators.

During my time in Sacramento, I realized that maintaining a relationship with legislators is just as important as the initial conversations. Here are the strategies I learned.

Look for an opportunity to educate and be helpful

In addition to offering basic definitions and leveling the knowledge base, it may be a good idea to look for opportunities to educate the policymakers and their staff. Offer to provide written materials, substantive training, data, or industry experts to dive deeper into the technology and its applications. This is also a great opportunity to maintain a relationship with the policymaker so that they don't forget you.

Be courteous, helpful, and polite to staff

While sometimes you will meet with policymakers directly, it is not unusual to interact with a policymaker's representative or staff. Even when you speak with a policymaker, it is not unusual for a member of her staff to attend. Regardless of who you talk to, you should always be helpful, courteous, polite, and helpful to everyone, including a policymaker's representatives and staff.

Of course, you should be extending the same courtesy to everyone you come across in the

legislative context. Because the new technology you are promoting may be completely new to the people you interact with, the way you act may affect how receptive they are to not only you, but also your tech.

Make a clear ask

After clearly explaining the technology, detailing the bills you support and why, and offering your assistance, it is often a good idea to end with a clear and specific ask. After all, the policymaker you're speaking to has just processed a large amount of information at one time. Therefore, distilling your spiel down to one specific action item will make it more memorable for the policymaker. This is also a great way to launch into making commitments and planning next steps. Don't overthink it too much; it can be very simple. For example, a straightforward "Can we count on your support for AB 2658 in the senate?" worked for me.

Keep and share notes with your supporters

After each meeting, write down your notes on all visits. Describe your observations in great detail so that you don't lose any impressions. Make sure you included who to follow up with and anything new that you've learned.

It is also helpful to write an overall summary of the meeting. Did you encounter support or resistance? Why? What specific concerns were expressed? Did you get any insights or tips from the conversation? Did you learn anything from the conversation? What parts of the conversations worked and what parts can be improved?

Taking the time to write this all down shortly after the meeting will be well worth it when it comes to further conversations and communication. If trying to type up all your notes is too overwhelming, a great option is to excuse yourself outside and record your thoughts out loud into a voice recorder app on your phone.

Share and compare your notes with other members of your group who attended the meeting and see where your observations agree and disagree. For example, was the technology so complicated that many offices have a very tenuous grasp of the technology and a majority requested additional information? Did people differentiate basic concepts such as Bitcoin and blockchain? This can help you coordinate next steps and refine your processes.

Follow up on promises and recommendations

After the meetings, you need to do a lot of follow-ups on what you explicitly promised and what may be helpful. These policymakers meet with a lot of people who all want different things. You want to stand out positively by not only getting their attention, but also continuously offering and following through with positive support. Did you promise data points or a more in-depth explanation? Did you sense that they could benefit from a resource such as a study or report? Be helpful, supportive, and relevant to build their understanding and cement yourself as a resource.

After the initial contact with policymakers, it is important to maintain a positive relationship throughout the legislative session. After all, it can take a long time to pass legislation. You want to make sure that the policymakers don't just remember you, but also remember you positively and want to actively work with you. By following these strategies, you can build the necessary positive relationships.

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