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Seminars for Arts Professionals

OCTOBER SEMINAR SUMMARY

Agents for Change – an insight into effective lobbying

Panel:

Tamara Winikoff -Executive Director of the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA);
Kim McConville - Co-founder of Beyond Empathy and Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2006;
Ruth Neave - former employee of the ex-Minister for the Arts, Frank Sartor, and someone with over twenty years experience in arts development.

What is lobbying?

Lobbying is the act of gathering resources to advance an agenda.

A resource can be money, support or political influence. It can be the money and power of an organisation or single person, or a large and dedicated support base.

Agendas can be single causes, or a suite of them. Having a number of causes on your agenda at any one time might dilute your focus slightly, especially if you don't have many resources, but it can give you the freedom to take the best advantage of any given situation.

Who can I lobby?

The wise lobbyist will cast a wide and varied net. Make friends with everybody you can but remember that it takes time to forge strong relationships, so don't spread yourself too thin.

Government

Government is often the first place people think of when looking for power and influence. While your local member or councillor will usually be the most accessible, they may not be the best suited to your cause, particularly if you're advocating change of legislation or looking to influence state or federal policy. Neave points out that there are three tiers of government, all with separate programs and agendas, and that having friends in all three can be a powerful tool in your lobbying tool belt.

Political parties are not always one big happy family. Just because you have a Liberal supporter does not necessarily mean you have the unconditional support of the Liberal Party. Conversely, just because you have friends in Labor does not mean you can't receive support from the Liberals. According to Neave, the relationship between the two parties is a lot nicer than it looks on *The 7:30 Report*. Neave also hints that if you can align yourself with independents, who are free from the constraints of party policy, they can often be your most dynamic supporters.

Not-for-profits and high-wealth individuals

When you're 'hitting on' potential supporters, political or otherwise, make sure that you are confident and to the point. Know *exactly* what you want. If you are sending an email or filling in an application, be concise. Neave says, 'if you think you can't fit it all on one page – you can!'

No matter who you approach, be prepared for a knockback, and when it happens (and it is inevitable that it will), do not take it personally. Government funding is not the endless sea of money it appears to be, whereas the amount of people trying to get more of it is.

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What do I need to know before I begin?

What do you want?

While it may seem obvious, the first thing you need to have is the support of the people you represent. Take the time to consult with your constituents to understand their needs and gain their trust. Before you do anything, you need to know *exactly* what you want and what it is going to take to achieve it. If you're going to be asking for funding, you need to know how much you need, and whether you're willing to take less if necessary.

Do your research

Be able to prove that your cause is valid. Having hard data and human stories to support your claims shows that what you're chasing *is* achievable, and that your supporters can take a share of the credit. There's a catch, however, in that if you fail, or attract the wrong kind of attention, your supporters will be implicated in this as well.

Know the difference between strategy and tactics

If you don't have a long-term strategy you'll have serious problems if things get hairy. As Neave can testify to, the political landscape can be brutal, and change quicker than a drag queen on Saturday night. If you have a long-term strategy in place, political upheavals will only be a temporary set-back.

Here's a quick, but by no means exhaustive list of possible tactics you can use as part of an overarching strategy:

- Mail campaigns – Email, postal or both.
- Meetings – Try to get face time with legislators or benefactors. This can take considerable time to achieve depending on how high up you want to go.
- Use the media – Identify stories from within your cause, and make them appealing to the media.
- Form relationships with the friends and relatives of potential supporters – Winikoff sneakily suggests that you should never underestimate the power of a casual conversation around the BBQ.
- Make yourself a permanent fixture at industry events - Learn the fine art of small talk, but don't go overboard at the bar, even if it is free.

The important thing is to be creative and think outside the isosceles triangle for tactics that your competition haven't thought of yet.

How do I approach potential supporters?

Be prepared for the long haul

Kim McConville says that at any given moment she is scouting for sources of funding or support 12 or even 18 months down the track. You need to show your potential supporters that you are dedicated to the cause, and not going to skip off as soon as things get tough. NAVA have been advocating for a comprehensive resale royalty system for nearly 20 years!

From little things, big things grow

McConville suggests easing your way into a relationship. Think of the relationship as the proverbial china shop, *sans* bull-like behaviour. Very often, particularly with private investors or not-for-profit organisations, your supporters will want to start small and see how things go. You can easily turn three thousand dollars into 30 if you invest it wisely and respect the pace that your supporter is comfortable with.

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Be flexible and intuitive

You have to be in tune with your surroundings and be open to changing your focus at a moments notice. To give a topical example; if your agenda relates to the rights of children in art, the recent Henson debacle would have been either the perfect opportunity to push your agenda forward, or a good reason to pull back; depending on which side you were on.

Make it worth their while

Not only do good relationships take time to build, they also have to be a two-way street. Make your offer attractive to your supporters' agendas and know how to present it in terms they understand. The pay-off for them might be political, or it might be that they want to be associated with a good cause, or leave a positive legacy. They might just be nice people. Whatever their motivation, be opportunistic and create a relationship based on *quid pro quo*, which I think is Latin for 'I scratch your back - you give me lots of money'.

Use your evidence wisely

Your 30 pages of data are useless if the person you're interested in doesn't have a head for facts. Your targets are usually busy people and the last thing you want to do is bore them. While you should always have the data as a backup, try to capture their hearts by taking them outside the office and *showing them* what you do; let them experience it for themselves. If this isn't possible, use your human stories. Bring photos to meetings; bring videos; bring *people* if you can manage it. "People give to people", as McConville says.

Be honest at all costs

If you stuff up, admit it. Not only will honesty keep your relationships respectful, you can gain a reputation as an upfront organisation that keeps its promises and is good to work with.

When is the right time to pop the question?

The relationship has developed, and you begin thinking that it's time to pop the big question. Whether you're asking for money or favours, the timing is critical. Try to read the signs and act when it feels appropriate. Although McConville says it doesn't get easier, don't paralyse yourself by fretting over it. You will make mistakes. A heavy sigh or look that says 'but I thought you liked me for me!' is not the end of the world.

When preparing yourself for a campaign, keep in mind the musings of the neurotic and deliciously quotable comedian Woody Allen, who once said that 80 percent of success is simply showing up. You won't achieve anything by sitting at home brooding over the vast indifference and iniquity of the universe. While the challenges will be many, the competition stiff, and the short term rewards relatively few; nothing is out of reach. You just need to get off your butt and get going.

by: Hugh Nichols