



Advocacy 101

with

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Why are we here?

To learn strategies and habits to maintain relationships with your representatives and advocate for your priorities more effectively to government



Interacting with Government at All Levels

Who is responsible for what?

- Federal, state, and local governments all have some shared and some unique responsibilities and powers that affect the running of your business

What is the best way to create change?

- Creating better outcomes on advocacy topics is multi-faceted, but boils down to maintaining relationships with policymakers and communicating proactively and decisively when priorities and threats are identified

How can they be reached?

- There are multiple channels that your representatives and administrative professionals can be reached on, including by email, phone, social media, and at in-person public events



Advocacy 101: Overview

While you always have me to rely on, amongst other policy professionals, never discount what you can get done lobbying on your own behalf directly to policymakers

We'll be discussing the following:

VPAP / VA News

LIS

Building a Relationship

Going Downtown: Tommy's Ten Tips



Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP)

The Virginia Public Access Project was established in 1997 with the goal of providing Virginians access to public documents reflecting financial aspects of politics

Over the years, VPAP has expanded its services to offer citizens access to diverse political news and public data on topics like campaign finance, elections, registrations and disclosures, legislative votes, and political developments - [VPAP's Mission](#)

[VaNews](#) is VPAP's daily political news digest, which is the daily reading list for most of the consequential people in Virginia politics



Legislative Information System (LIS)

The Legislative Information System is Virginia's official legislative tracking website: <https://lis.virginia.gov/>

It was recently redesigned for enhanced user accessibility, but can still be somewhat tricky to master at first, so here are some best practices:

- Use search terms with objective vs subjective answers
- Read the PDF versions of the bills rather than the summary
- Make sure you're reading the most recent version of any bill



Building a Relationship

The goal of building a relationship is to become a resource for your legislator to rely on for industry perspective, pertinent data, and answers on technical topics that they may not be familiar with

Most important for these purposes, is January and February during the Virginia General Assembly Session, but more than ever, policy is being formed year-round through work-group, commission, and task force processes that are meant to produce consensus



Building a Relationship: Methods

Mobilize around key dates

- Especially in federal and local contexts, become familiar with timelines and processes, that way you can plan your advocacy to be most effective

Make yourself an industry liaison and resource

- Take the time to correspond with your representatives about the “why” behind your advocacy, especially in the off-season, and encourage them in their learning about industry topics
- Keep in mind that most people have no idea how our businesses work so be patient and kind

Political participation

- Attending a fundraiser or community event being held by an elected official is a great way to get face to face time with them



Building a Relationship: Timing

Seasons for planning and action

- For the General Assembly, we plan all year for action in January and February, but for most local governments, meetings are going on all year. Make sure to also look out for budget season.

Constant simmer of communication

- When the industry is in the news, or if something significant happens in the industry that a legislator ought to know about, just take a moment and shoot them a text or an email to notify them. It's another case of "nobody knows anything until you tell them." This also reinforces the relationship that you're building

Preparing grassroots support

- When you're trying to mobilize the public to get behind you, planning enough time is crucial



Building a Relationship: Your Own Connections

Leverage your industry resources

- As a member of VRLTA, when a legislator asks you a question that you can't answer, all you have to say is "I know someone who can." You have the VRLTA team, as well as so many more folks at the federal level, and often some coalitions at the local level for support

Observe questions being asked elsewhere

- Take any opportunity to learn what is going on in other places, especially those that surround you. Ideas will often tend to become viral.

Be pro-active in seeking solutions

- If you notice something that is not working for your business policy-wise, you are most likely not alone. Bring it up to the proper folks, be they your colleagues, your association, or your elected officials. Never rely on someone else to notice.



Going Downtown: Tommy's Ten Tips

- 1. The Administrative Assistant is your friend, but they are also the boss:** Your meetings were set up in advance with House and Senate staff, all of whom are trying their best, but some of whom may have either made a mistake or had a short-notice problem come up. If their schedule doesn't match your sheet, do not press them, but rather try to find another acceptable time to drop by.
- 2. Be on time:** If you need to break your group up to make sure that you can make your time slots, that is a great way to cover more ground as long as everyone knows the plan and stays in communication. In some cases, these legislators have packed schedules that won't be conducive to re-scheduling, so make every effort to be at the office you need to be at on time or beforehand.
- 3. Your meeting may be with a Legislative Aide (LA) rather than the legislator:** Working in the confines of Virginia's Constitution is hard, and often-times legislators will be pulled into important meetings that stop them from being able to meet with the public. Remember, that LA is a staff of one and their work can be crucial to our success.



Tommy's Ten Tips Cont'd

- 4. Be kind to everyone. Yes, EVERYONE:** Everyone in the General Assembly Building is working on something important to them and others. Sometimes their zeal can get in the way of their manners. That is not an accepted excuse. Policymakers and other important stakeholders will not be identifiable unless you are very familiar with what certain pins look like; all the best practice is to treat everyone like a Senator.
- 5. Humanize yourself, and then get to the Point:** One of the most important pieces of development we can do in the General Assembly Building is to build simple human relationships. That means if you know your kid plays soccer with a policymaker's kid, or if you go to the same place of worship, or if you saw them out at some community event, those are great relationship-building tools to connect with them. Once that has been covered, dive right into the talking points.
- 6. Educate and elaborate, but don't argue:** Not all our meetings are going to be with legislators who vote with us all of the time. When we are giving our industry positions, we want to make sure that we are clear on what we believe and why. We certainly want to answer any questions to the best of our ability; but if that is met with a polite difference of opinion, respond pleasantly and thank the staffer or legislator for their willingness to meet with us anyway. In this context, a good impression is more valuable than a good point.



Tommy's Ten Tips Cont'd

- 7. Avoid standing in lanes of traffic:** The New General Assembly Building is unfamiliar to practically everyone, and there are many groups trying to navigate it for the first time at the same time. Do your best to leave the lanes of traffic open when you can.
- 8. If you make the sale, stop selling:** In some of these meetings, the LA is going to be waiting to say, “we are with you and they have voted properly on this before.” If you get an answer to that effect, your job is done; give them a hearty “thank you for your time,” and move on.
- 9. Have fun and make connections:** Much like tip #5, a lot of what goes on in the General Assembly is about personal relationships; we want to start building a personal relationship with the legislators that you are meeting with. So never miss an opportunity to make an interpersonal connection that you can follow up on after Session and start a longer conversation. “Hey, we actually need a stop sign in our neighborhood, could I work with you on that?” or “Gosh, I love your newsletters,” etc. all work great.



Tommy's Ten Tips Cont'd

10. Do not fear the Legislator: Remember, it is more scared of you than you are of it. Sometimes folks can unintentionally clam up from nerves when they are talking to a policymaker who has such power over how our industry operates. These policymakers are in most cases just regular folks who work 9-5 jobs themselves, and they often have little scope about our organization other than what we tell them. They're excited to connect with you, their constituents, to whom they owe these jobs. Nothing to fear.



2026 VRLTA Day on the Hill

Registration is open! Join us on January 26th and 27th in Richmond for our 2026 VRLTA Day on the Hill & Taste of VRLTA Reception!



January 26th, 2026

VRLTA Membership Meetings & Taste of VRLTA Reception

January 27th, 2026

Legislative Breakfast & Meetings
with Legislators



We'd love to hear your questions!

