



**WINNING IN WASHINGTON:
HOW PR CAN DRIVE
POLICY WINS IN 2025**



INTRODUCTION

From the time of our nation's founding, lobbyists have been central to Americans' representation in our national and state governments. **They represent the people's constitutional** "right to petition [your] government," giving regular Americans a chance to exercise their First Amendment rights with respect to the issues most dear to them. Their technical expertise is critical to educating lawmakers and regulators about niche matters ranging from taxes and healthcare to toy regulations and import policies.

As the state and federal governments have grown, the business of lobbying was valued at \$4 billion in 2023 and employed 10,000 people through 300 firms. And those are just the individuals who need to register according to federal law. In 2014, American University professor and lobbying industry researcher James Thurber estimated that nearly 10 times that many people are indirectly employed in lobbying work.

That growth means that the challenge of making a lobbying impact - is harder than ever. Almost every issue has two - or three or four - perspectives represented by a lobbyist, employed by either a government affairs department or a lobbying firm that represents multiple clients. This trend is on the rise due to

- the complexity of federal policy, which means there are more lobbyists doing more work on more niche topics than ever.
- outsiders' use of platforms like social media and digital news media to counter months of quiet lobbying effort. Politicians can be put on blast in an instant by a constituent - or lobbying interest - that knows how to go viral. Watch how a brand can be torched instantly by a stray tweet or poorly worded Instagram post - then consider how a policy or cause can be sunk - or elevated - the same way.

"Proven Media Solutions has done a great job breaking down and explaining when and how to use public relations to achieve desired outcomes. 2025 is going to be active and every lobbyist should keep this paper handy for when clients request a full-press approach to achieving their advocacy goals."

— Brian Darling, President, Liberty Government Affairs

- The increased use of “Christmas tree” bills into which every policy priority seems to be jammed. It can be hard to ensure that top priorities make it into bills that are put together in weeks or even days.

This means that lobbyists must become strategic leaders to open the door to Members’ offices, keep it open throughout a policy campaign, and facilitate messaging that arrives through every available opening - town halls, the press, social media, rallies, etc. This requires bringing in outside partners who will help create impacts far beyond attending Capitol Hill events and shaking hands at Members’ offices.

One key outside partner is a public relations (PR) team - whether internally or through vendors - that keeps constituents engaged and information flowing through media outlets that matter to elected officials. The lobbyist opens the door and sets up the messaging strategy. Then PR firms like **Proven Media Solutions step in to create tailored messaging that builds a phalanx of support – subject matter experts, media professionals, and the enthusiastic public – who will bolster the narrative while the lobbyist does the quiet lobbying work behind the scenes.**

On a practical level, effective public relations means that when everyone else is taking a vacation - during Member recesses, the client is being heard through op-eds in local papers, or meetings in the district office with constituents who promote the progress of that meeting in a press release. When things seem “quiet” during an election season, public relations efforts can keep a steady drumbeat going and keep Members of Congress engaged.

“Public relations is a necessary component to any government relations strategy. Facts and the truth are only as valuable as the people who know them, which is why voices ranging from everyday people to respected professionals should be participating in the process on your behalf. Op-eds, press conferences, trade magazine interviews, and other public-facing messaging creates a public drumbeat that can often tip the scales in the favor of those smart enough to seek out quality help.”

— Owen Caine, Vice President Government Affairs, The Toy Association

PUBLIC RELATIONS

The traditional apparatuses of public relations - image maintenance, crisis response, etc - have much to offer lobbying professionals. Think of the Member of Congress who sees an op-ed in a key state media outlet from a doctor about an issue that's been discussed for months at the Rayburn office. Then that same Member's staff makes him aware of key social media posts timed to the upcoming town hall. The Member now knows what professionals in the field think about the issue, and he knows how his constituents are leaning through their engagements on Facebook, X, TikTok, and Instagram. He's now at least halfway to knowing how he's going to vote, too.

PR can often be a secret weapon that takes the lobbying opposition by surprise. The obscure tax or labor policy may get only a blurb in Politico or The Hill, or a handful of public comments - but those small PR hits can be a lifeline for an industry or a company in a specific region. PR makes sure that it is widely covered by trade and regional media for saving (or killing) jobs.

Thus, Members of Congress can be the hero - or the villain - depending on whether they took the position that the lobbyist's clients and their grassroots supporters made a priority. A PR supplement to a local lobbyist's efforts may not cause fireworks in Washington, D.C., but that's okay. **It is designed to make a huge difference where it counts: for the Member in the district. And it may well determine whether he or she goes back to D.C. next year.**

“Successful lobbying and public relations make personal connections with key audiences by sharing the facts about policy decisions and then showcasing the people impacted by those decisions. While lobbyists engage policymakers and constituent leaders, public relations engages everyday constituents to make a broader impact and bring more voices into the policymaking process.”

— Shawn Friesen, Principal, Chamber Hill Strategies

HOW LOBBYING AND PR WORK TOGETHER

Lobbying and PR share a common goal: to influence an audience through strategic communication. For the purposes of this paper, think of strategic communication as aiming the *right* message to the *right* audience, through the right channels and platforms, in service of a goal.

For a lobbyist, this might mean tailoring meeting materials or elevator pitch differently depending on how well you know the Member or staff, what resonates with them, and their party leadership's stance. Naturally, it is also key to tailor lobbying efforts for each Member's constituent interests. For example, seasoned lobbyists will often create a handout for each office they are lobbying, showing the impact of a given policy in that Member's district.

In public relations, pitch and messaging language will change depending on a reporter's beat, the outlets you want to reach, and the best spokesperson for the message and the platform. For example, a blunt CEO may not be the company's best spokesperson for testifying on Capitol Hill after a major breach. The more tech-conversant CTO may be better to drive credibility. When they work together, lobbyists take the lead by laying out the campaign to influence regulators and elected officials to make desired changes. **And then the PR team reaches diverse stakeholders, whose opinions matter to the small number of people at the top whose minds must be changed.**

That's how green energy companies have kept subsidies flowing despite the industry's many controversies - such as the environmental impacts of mining, Tesla founder Elon Musk's politically divisive brand, and failed policies like ethanol requirements. Decades of public relations, from federal agencies like the EPA to grassroots organizations to prominent individuals in media and the scientific community, has convinced a wide swath of the public that green energy is the way to go, even to the point of spending billions annually when household budgets are tight.

The odds are low that any given lobbyist will be the first person to present an issue to the Member. That's why the most successful messaging campaigns start well before the first lobbyist meeting takes place.

WHEN PR IS NOT THE SOLUTION

Public relations is not the solution for every lobbying effort or every lobbying firm. Lobbyists should work with clients to evaluate its potential impact by answering a few key questions about the client's overall strategy, available resources, objectives, and targeted Members. **Otherwise, a lot of money and time could be wasted - at best, distracting from success, and at worst earning distrust from both the client and Member(s).**

Lack of coherent strategy

If lobbying clients don't have a concrete strategic vision of what they want to accomplish, PR will use time, money, and other resources that could have been used more effectively.

When building a client's road map, it's better to collaboratively discern what role PR resources should play in an overall campaign. That way, you're on the same page instead of throwing a Hail Mary pass that's likely to fail.

When clients are looking for fast results.

Lobbyists know that nothing in Washington is guaranteed, yet many clients who engage public relations expect fast results. The modern digital environment means that few media placements create a deluge of support or opposition on their own. The best results come from a long-term surround-sound messaging strategy that breaks through the noise and overcomes unpredictable factors like election results, geopolitical events, and shifting public opinions that can easily delay any particular campaign for weeks or months.

Like lobbying, public relations is not a sniper shot. It's more like a rocket launch that requires a strong message with a relevant audience to take off, get through the atmosphere, and eventually hit orbit.

When an issue is being handled behind the scenes

As Washington becomes more polarized, the days of old men in smoke-filled rooms are mostly over. But some lobbying - like a niche appropriations award or a quiet foreign relations conference or a classified cyber security contract - is impervious to public relations pressure. PR could even backfire because, while we live in a democratic republic, not everything is for the public's eyes and ears. Some things are genuinely left for only a few key staffers to know until the project is ready for public consumption and promotion.

When PR may not be worth the price

There are also times when PR is a good solution, but the cost may exceed the value. For example, lawmakers have specific constituencies and must be responsive to public reception and sentiment to be re-elected. On the other hand, regulators, such as Cabinet heads and those who work for them, are slightly different. They should still be accessible to the public, and major regulations require a public comment period where they may be sensitive to public input. But the decision-maker may be a decades-long staffer who is beholden only to a political appointee's direction. And in the maze of federal bureaucracy, it is not as easy to hold decision-makers accountable as it is for a Member of Congress.

In this case, PR may be helpful to raise awareness and to educate some stakeholders. But it's probably too late for PR to add real value unless you're going to invest millions of dollars in a very short window.

"Research shows that op-eds shift public opinion. They can raise the salience of an issue over the long term and prompt ordinary Americans to engage with their lawmakers. That kind of engagement by the public can move votes -- and change policy."

— Robby Schrum, Managing Director, Keybridge Communications

WHEN PR IS USEFUL

When major associations and their lobbying teams walk into Congressional office buildings, their brand recognition enjoys near full saturation with everyone they meet. Members and their staff know what to expect when they shake hands with someone from the National Education Association or the National Federation of Independent Businesses, and the brands' histories shape the conversations.

Emerging industries and smaller players don't have this luxury. But they can build a foundation of credibility well before walking into the first Member's office. Play word association for a minute. If you were a Congressman and a lobbyist shook your hand and said, "My name is Jane Smith, and I am with the National Education Association" - what does that brand mean to you? Is it teachers who care about kids - or is it a liberal advocacy group? Is the National Rifle Association a protector of constitutional rights or an enabler of thousands of firearm deaths each year?

PR can boost a company's or organization's credibility before that organization ever walks into the halls of Congress. And that credibility is everything when it comes to lobbying lawmakers, who will need to know who you are as they consider the accuracy of what you say.

Proactively shape public opinion

On their own, lobbyists can educate decision-makers, overcome biases, and create results. This CREDIBILITY and TRUST for the message can come from big-name influencers and established experts (doctors/farmers/business owners) or from sympathetic private citizens, like the guests of senior politicians during the State of the Union address.

But lobbyists are not experts at the pressure for or against decision makers that comes through grassroots and grasstops efforts. For example, it's good for the President to acknowledge the SOTU guest. But it's better for the White House press team to schedule interviews before and after the SOTU, and help the guest author a strategically placed op-ed or two.

Governors are especially good at this type of one-two punch, probably because they are much closer to their constituents than even many Members of Congress. In 2019, then-Louisiana governor John Bel Edwards was in a three way re-election race, running as a Democrat in a conservative state. Edwards had the benefit of incumbency, but he also used solid PR tactics to take the edge over his opponents.

In August 2019, Edwards told the press about a plan to use \$450 million to renovate the New Orleans Superdome. But he didn't make the announcement at his office; he went to the New Orleans suburbs and was joined by the New Orleans Saints owner, head coach, and fan favorite quarterback Drew Brees. Edwards also took the practice field and did some drills with Brees and the team.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the photos from that day went a long way to imprint the governor in voters' minds as a successful, healthy, all-American leader with the right vision for Louisiana. More than two years later, after protracted rounds of negotiation between Administration officials, the Republican-led legislature and Republican officials and the New Orleans Saints organization, a deal was struck to do the improvements and keep the Saints in town through 2055. Projecting an image of confidence was key to Edwards winning this deal and putting a big feather in his political cap⁶.

Playing defense

The balance of power in Washington is constantly shifting, but that doesn't necessarily mean interest groups ride the same roller coaster in terms of lobbying needs. In fact, for many clients, when the party that typically carries their water is out of power, that's the time their lobbyists do the heaviest lifting playing defense. For example, when Republicans hold the levers of power, environmental groups work overtime to maintain federal environmental regulations. When Democrats have power, members of industry may push to limit new regulations.

PR is one of defensive lobbying's most critical weapons because it engages multiple audiences through multiple voices. First, groundswells of strategically placed media hits can elevate issue awareness and shape discussion on policies within the Beltway that may have previously been under the radar. Second, a well-run media campaign that targets Members' constituencies back home as well as key allies and donor networks can peel off majority Members while strengthening minority Members fighting the pending legislation.

For example, we helped public affairs firms find credible voices in key states to oppose President Joe Biden's rent control and drug price ceiling policies. These "Average Joe" authors happily signed onto op-eds that ended up in statewide media in New Hampshire and Arizona - and our clients took them back to business interests who used them as part of the wider influence and lobbying efforts.

Crisis response

While the best way to solve a crisis is to not have one, and the second-best way is to build a lot of trust before it happens, you can't predict some Washington crises. It can come after a major company's collapse or cyber breach, or simply as the result of an election that radically changes the political support structure in Washington.

Let's take this a step further to the nitty-gritty of Capitol Hill press coverage. Building a PR cadence will help the client put out favorable talking points and counter narratives. Example: there is a filibuster, and Senator A speaks in support of the filibuster. Clients who oppose *and* support the Senator should seek to be included in articles about the filibuster.

In the face of opposition or negative narratives, PR professionals can work with lobbyists to manage crises, mitigate negative publicity, and reframe the perception of a company or an issue. This creates a favorable backdrop to shore up support from Congressional or agency allies when the going gets tough. PR support can also give cover to lawmakers or executive agency supporters who are inclined to support an issue or cause, but need public perception to shift in order to do so.

Since the Israel-Hamas war broke out in October 2023, relations between Israel and the U.S. - that is, Israel's biggest ally - have become increasingly strained. The Biden Administration has been critical of Israel's military actions in the West Bank and treatment of civilians, and highly placed officials have gone so far as to call for the Israeli people to replace Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Such a public break between a U.S. President and Israeli Prime Minister is unprecedented.

In May 2024, the Israeli Embassy held an Israeli Independence Day event, where the President, the Vice President, or another high level executive official was expected to speak as part of an annual tradition. The invitation was received; but the Biden/ Netanyahu tension meant that nobody RSVPed "yes." But Israel didn't take public offense. Instead, organizer pivot to a message bipartisan support by key leaders on Capitol Hill. Public audiences didn't see Israel on the outs, but instead a public demonstration of support for the longstanding US-Israel alliance by House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) and Democratic Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar (D-CA).

Building alliances and coalitions to impact legislation and regulations

Regulators and lawmakers are often a combined audience - regulators are not immune to PR, and that's more true the higher up you go in an agency's organizational chart. Furthermore, digital media can pump up the response to a regulatory comment period and get lawmakers' attention, looking high and low for everyday folks who agree with your issue and are willing to write in at the push of a button. These digital media campaigns work for Members of Congress as well, along with media pushes to keep up the pressure.

A tried-and-true lobbying tactic is to build coalitions of like-minded organizations. This can be fraught with challenges, such as prominence, messaging nuance, and - when creating a new organization - legal costs and complications.

But when PR campaigns can build coalitions with the stroke of a pen. All you need is a press release or letter that groups can sign. Then, ask everyone to push it out through social media, websites, and press channels.

And for more complicated lobbying scenarios, such as ones that do require the heavy lifting of creating a new coalition that has its own legal set-up, PR can turn what might otherwise be criticized as an "astroturf" effort into pictures, op-eds, interviews, and other "cover" for Members who want to be seen as supporting a grassroots group that isn't doing the bidding of corporate entities.

The Better Medicare Alliance (BMA) was formed in 2015 as a nonprofit 501(c)(4). According to its website, it is a "community of experts...driven by our common goal to support Medicare Advantage, which is a federal program that allows seniors to have their Medicare provided by private insurers, using federal funds. The program is increasingly popular among America's seniors, and BMA works to defend it through lobbying, press, policy analysis, and a grassroots program.

Lobbying alone by private insurance companies, industry, and trade associations might have convinced policymakers to support MA despite withering attacks. But having a consumer-focused public brand, the added strength of policy analysis and grassroots programs, and the promotion power of PR and social media creates value that can't be bought by millions in ads or political donations.

David vs. Goliath

Lobbying is often not fought on a level playing field. In the pet industry, you have major corporations and major non-profits fighting it out federally, in the states, and in local and county offices. Both sides point to evidence that they are David fighting Goliath - small business pet store owners and breeders point to coordination by The Humane Society and other nonprofit groups that have hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue. Conversely, the nonprofits say they are protecting helpless animals against unethical - and big-dollar - corporations.

PR can craft compelling narratives for public consumption, turning complex issues into relatable and emotionally engaging stories. A well-told story not only captures public attention, but also fosters empathy and understanding, key elements in garnering support for lobbying initiatives.

That's how supporters of Alice Marie Johnson, who was in jail for running a crime syndicate, secured a commutation of her sentence by President Donald Trump in 2018. Johnson's case wasn't new to the criminal justice reform movement; but it took Kim Kardashian West's lobbying influence and public profile to convince Trump to commute Johnson's sentence, which led to her being released from prison.

Kardashian said that Trump was receptive to what she had to say - the lobbying side of the effort. But it was Kardashian's public discussion of the case and her time with Trump that generated massive audiences across many platforms - something which undoubtedly impacted the celebrity-aware Trump's decision.

And all along - including after the commutation - Johnson was presented as a victim of a criminal justice system that went after a woman who simply made a few wrong decisions while navigating financial disaster as a single mother.

Surround-sound messaging

Picture a group of scientists landing on a wonder drug. High fives all around. The lab is full of elation and excitement for the future. But the truth is that the hardest work is still ahead of them. The project is still far from the fulfillment of treating disease and saving lives. Getting the new drug to patients will depend on navigating the complex path of developing research to get approval from regulators and convince healthcare practitioners of the new drug's efficacy. And there's also a third audience that is equally important: the general public, or end users.

With the amount of money spent on pharmaceutical development, stakeholders can't afford to leave anything to chance. That's where lobbying and PR come in to open the

door; build the necessary network of regulators, elected officials, and influencers; and support the groundswell to get approval across the finish line.

PR should be engaged early and often when surround-sound messaging is needed. Getting healthcare industry outlets to cover the development, science journals to feature the research, and business media to highlight the patents starts the drip campaign. Simultaneously, press events and regional op-eds featuring patients who struggle from the potentially curable illness will bring out the *human* realities involved

Then, the PR continues to work, becoming part of ads, viral social media posts, influencer engagement, and expert testimony that will help bring awareness to the public at large that miracle cures are ready and waiting - the FDA simply needs to act, and approve the drug application as soon as possible. Once the drug is approved, it's time to wash, rinse, and repeat, because CMS needs to approve payment for the drug

You need regulators on board, elected officials excited and willing to speak up in your favor in Committee, and your opponents - who want special treatment for themselves and not you - neutralized. This doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen without a long campaign that uses all available strategic tools.

“Lobbying without a surrogacy and public relations component is like fighting a land war with rifles while the enemy has tanks. You’ll lose every time because it is public opinion that sways policymakers, and in the modern era you need a surround-sound approach to break through the noise.”

— Ryan Ellis, President, Center for a Free Economy

WHY LOBBYING NEEDS PUBLIC RELATIONS

When all is said and done, “lobbying” is really a technical term for helping ensure ordinary people’s voices make a difference. The man on the street can’t expect his representative to hear him through two inches of solid mahogany.

A good lobbyist opens that door, gets into the room with the person making the calls, and presses his client’s case. **But when a group like ours comes in, that door stays open, and that good lobbyist becomes a great one – with minimal extra effort, assisted by a well-established, experienced operation designed to amplify and optimize voices.**

[Proven Media Solutions](#) helps lobbying and public affairs firms make an impact with key stakeholders in Washington and in the states. We pull from our team’s experience in journalism, Capitol Hill lobbying, and grassroots campaigns experience.



SHOULD YOUR CLIENT INVEST IN PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Contact us to find out.

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Dustin founded Proven Media Solutions to help clients make an impact by getting in the press. Drawing on 20 years as a writer, journalist, and PR consultant, he has developed an approach that secures media coverage in diverse industries like financial technology, healthcare, education, and politics.

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FOOTNOTES

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