

Defining Library Advocacy

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is a **planned, deliberate and sustained effort** to raise awareness of an issue. It is a continuous process during which support and understanding of the issue are gradually increased over an extended period of time. Advocacy utilizes many marketing and promotion tools.

Advocacy differs from both promotion and marketing. Promotion is sharing library information with specific target audiences, like hours and programming. Marketing communicates the value of a product to customers and includes finding out what people want and need, and then responding to those needs.

The lines between advocacy, marketing and promotion often overlap. The important thing to remember is that a successful advocacy campaign requires you to use all three techniques effectively, no matter by what name they are called.

Who are Library Advocates?

Library advocates believe in the importance of free and equitable access to information in a democratic society. Library advocates know that libraries and librarians are vital to the future of an information literate nation and speak out for libraries. Library advocates are everywhere even though they don't always call themselves that. They are:

Library trustees

Whether elected or appointed, trustees have political and community connections that can benefit the library. They have clout as public officials charged with representing the best interest of the library and their community.

Friends of Libraries

As library "ambassadors" in the community, Friends play a valuable role as the eyes and ears of the library as well as its voice. They also help provide the numbers that make decision makers sit up and take notice.

Library users

Students, teachers, parents, seniors, business people and other library users are key to any advocacy effort. Their testimonials about how the library has helped them and how much they need libraries provide powerful evidence that commands attention.

Institutional and community leaders

School principals, college presidents, union leaders, CEOs and foundation officials should be part of your advocacy network. Support from such leaders helps to ensure your message will be heard at the highest levels.

Library staff

All library staff have countless opportunities to build public understanding and advocate support, both on the job or off. Library administrators are responsible for developing an ongoing advocacy effort, one with well-defined roles for staff, board and Friends.

Potential advocates

Many people have fond memories of using the library as children, have family members who benefit, or simply believe libraries are important. Some may be highly placed in their institutions or communities. These potential advocates are often glad to speak out if asked.

Building a Library Advocacy Network

Building an effective library advocacy network takes ongoing recruitment and regular communication to keep library advocates informed and involved. In many cases, the Friends of the Library are the nucleus for such a network. While there may not be a need for formal meetings, there should be personal contact on a regular basis with key advocates.

To be most effective, your library advocacy network should represent a cross section of your community by age, income and ethnicity. It should include newspaper editors and legislators, as well as library users and staff. The larger and more diverse your network and the more powerful its members, the stronger the influence it will wield.

What you can do

Survey the library's trustees, Friends, users and supporters. What civic or professional organizations do they belong to? Are they willing to write letters, call elected officials or recruit other advocates? Do they have key contacts with the media, administration, school board or community that might be helpful? Are they experienced, skilled speakers?

Make sure library advocates receive the library newsletter and annual report as well as updates on funding, legislation and other concerns.

Trustees

Keep well informed about library issues such as funding, censorship, and information literacy.

Make a point of getting to know local and state officials with decision-making power over the library.

Use your political savvy and connections on behalf of the library.

Maintain communication with key officials and their staff even when you aren't seeking their support. Keep them informed of library concerns.

Hold an annual recognition event for library advocates, including elected officials and business and community leaders who have lent their support.

Library Staff should:

Be enthusiastic and positive. Let library users and supporters know they can make a difference. Make a point of thanking them for their contributions.

Meet with key community leaders regularly to educate them about your activities and concerns and to recruit their assistance.

Keep library users informed of library issues and advocacy activities. Post action alerts in the library. Dedicate a portion of your library's newsletter and web site to local, state or national legislative issues/concerns.

Recruit advocates. Call or write members of the network at least twice a year to give them updated information. Make sure they receive updates on library issues.

Encourage library users to share their "library stories." Invite them to testify at budget hearings, participate in media interviews and visit legislators with library officials.

Participate in community groups and use the opportunity to tell the library story and recruit advocates.

Winning Advocates

Setting Priorities: The Action Plan

Library advocacy should be tied to the library's overall goals and ongoing public awareness program. To mount an effective advocacy campaign, you must have an action plan with a clear goal and supportive objectives.

Getting organized

Define goals and objectives.

1. **Identify desired outcomes:** new legislation, more funding, greater visibility.
2. **Assess the situation** in targeted areas based on your objectives. Identify barriers/opposition/strengths/potential supporters.
3. **Develop a communication plan.** Key elements include: defining the key message, targeting key audiences, and identifying communication strategies and resources needed.
4. Develop a work plan and assign duties.
5. **Document and evaluate results.** This is how you learn to do it better next time.

Framing the message

Elected officials are pulled in many directions as they seek to represent their constituents. A clear understanding of libraries and their impact is necessary for continued support of library issues. Your message should be specific, to the point and identify clear benefits for the legislator's constituents. No matter what your message is, provide supporting facts, examples and stories in your communication. As you develop your message, consider the following:

Be able to summarize the message in one minute or less. Time is extremely precious for public officials because of the demands made on them.

Be specific – what action do you need from your legislator?

Be positive – always ask how can we work together?

Know Your Elected Official

The more you know about an elected official, the more effective you can be in communicating the library message. The know your elected official worksheet can help you target who can be most helpful to your cause as you shape your message and decide who's best (and not) to deliver it.

Remember, you don't need to win over every elected official to be effective. Certain officials sway votes because of their leadership positions or because they are considered experts in a particular area. When deciding which constituent groups you want to mobilize, ask yourself:

Who can be most the most effective communicator?

Selecting the best person to deliver your message can make the difference on whether it is heard. Smart advocates know which elected officials are most important and who is most important to those elected officials. These individuals must present themselves as credible spokespersons with knowledge of the political process and their role in it. They must be able to position libraries as an important force in today's society. The most likely representatives are constituents who care enough to speak out about a particular issue. Other important people are:

Campaign donors who happen to be constituents.

Local opinion leaders such as CEO's, other elected officials (county executives, sheriff, etc.), other newsmakers, and editors of local media who shape editorial opinions and news coverage.

Potential candidates who may oppose lawmakers in future elections.

The public – Who voted for them? What are the polls in their district saying?

Libraries have just about every kind of person imaginable as users and supporters. We need know who best to champion our cause. They need to know how to communicate the impact of the library effectively, in the language of the decision makers.

Relationships develop over time, after repeat visits and the chance to build trust and credibility. Your request will be more persuasive coming from someone with an existing relationship who has shown an interest in their values, beliefs, priorities and experiences.

Identify people who can help develop relationships and make the connections your library needs. Make sure those representing the library are well informed with both facts and stories about the way the library impacts and transforms the community.

Staying Connected:

Advocacy efforts should continue year-round. As with most things though, timing is everything. To be effective, you must familiarize yourself with the various stages of the process, which can be lengthy. All politics is local: please keep your local schedule in mind.

Advocacy Action Schedule

Six months before:

- Compile pertinent local data.
- Invite potential supporters to the library. Identify allies/collaborators.
- Offer model language/concise legislation. Train advocates.

When the session/budget cycle begins:

- Look for the library provisions in proposed legislation. Work to amend or delete unacceptable items.
- Visit elected officials when you need to provide information/educate.
- Monitor library provisions and keep advocates informed.
- Know when appropriate committees are meeting and time your visits and media outreach, i.e., op-eds, editorial board meetings, letters-to-the-editor, accordingly.
- Indicate your preferences on matters of concern.
- Learn from your mistakes and adjust your strategy. Ask for feedback.

After the session ends:

- Attend fundraisers. Thank the elected officials(s).
- Invite lawmakers to visit the library.
- Give recognition awards and gear up for re-election time.

Before re-election time:

- Volunteer to help during re-election time.
- Identify key elected officials/policymakers who supported you.
- Invite candidates to the library to meet staff/users/advocates.
- Organize and publicize the library agenda. Encourage candidates to include libraries in their “platform.”
- Cultivate relationships with policymakers and key constituents.

During primary and general elections:

- Work behind the scenes.
- Focus on key committees and get to know their members’ interests and priorities.
- Maintain informal but ongoing contact with public officials.
- Continually introduce yourself and identify your issues.

An effective advocate

- Maintains contact with key elected officials.
- Knows how to frame the message for elected officials.
- Understands the importance of timing.

Always says thank you.

Ideas for Library Events

The following are programs/events that could provide the appropriate setting for hosting your elected official:

Open House. Host a theme open house each season (e.g., in October have a ghost story reading for families; in December, celebrate an old-fashioned English Christmas based on Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*). Provide tours and a brief synopsis of the services the library offers.

Library Breakfast/Lunch/Dinner. Invite your elected officials and other influential community members.

Behind the Scenes Tour. Demonstrate the services you provide. Offer a ride on the bookmobile or visit your Outreach staff in action.

Candidates Forum. Host a forum of local candidates seeking office prior to the general election.

Constituent Meeting Place. Host a monthly meeting at which your elected officials can update constituents on recent events.

Annual Friends of the Library Meeting. Ask your legislator to speak.

Making a Difference Award: Present the local official an award for their hard work on behalf of libraries.

Partnership/Collaboration Tour. Invite elected officials to meet your community partners that help promote the library's message.

Personal Librarian. Assign a librarian to work specifically with an elected official and their staff on local issues. Send out a letter introducing the librarian and give examples of research and local demographics that can be accessed easily through a phone call or email to this librarian.

Community Recognition. Ask local officials to adopt resolutions or to offer proclamations recognizing your library for its efforts within the community.

Framing the Message Worksheet

The issue:

The message is: (25 words or less)

Three key points:

1.

2.

3.

This is important to your constituents because:

We need you to: (call for action)

Know Your Elected Official

Name of official:

Position on libraries:

District:

Voting record:

Political party: Political philosophy:
(liberal, conservative, moderate)

Committee Assignments:

Date first elected:

Placement on seniority scale:

Political experience:
(chairmanships, committee memberships, other elected or appointed positions)

Key supporters/campaign contributors: (seniors, labor, business, education, etc.)

Library connections: (family, friends, advocates)

Key areas of concern:

Who should deliver the message? How?