



AIA Best Practices: Government relations: Cultivating decision makers

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Summary

This article is aimed at small and midsize architecture firms that want to develop a successful government relations program in order to create new business opportunities.

Government relations, which refers to engaging decision makers in the political sphere to obtain government-contracted work, is not necessarily equivalent to lobbying, which ultimately is intended to influence legislation. The focus of this article is on the former as it relates to the architecture industry. In addition, the strategies described here apply primarily to state and local governments, rather than federal.

Win big when you're small

For many business development professionals in the architecture industry, the process of winning government work presents both a daunting challenge and an exciting opportunity. And rightfully so: The world of politics can be confusing and frustrating and yet incredibly rewarding.

There are concrete steps that can position your firm to win government work. And these tactics are really effective: Since implementing this strategy in the early 1990s, the percentage of our firm's revenue from public-sector work has risen from zero to 53%, even while we've maintained a philosophy of diversification between private and public projects. These projects have included public schools, community parks, and work in higher education.

Where to begin

Treat government relations as you would any project; after all, political insiders are still decision makers, just in a government structure. Solid business development principles still apply: the ability to demonstrate good work, align pursuits with applicable project expertise, add value through unique and competitive knowledge, and verify funding sources is essential.

The first step in initiating a government relations program is to examine why a firm wants to get involved in government work. There are many answers, of course, but most firms should be motivated primarily by a desire to:

- improve the communities in which they work and live
- gain access to key government influencers and decision makers

- extend one's marketing efforts into a new market

Firm leaders must ask themselves the following:

- Does government work align with our corporate values?
- Does it align with our expertise?
- Are we prepared for the long-term investments of time and resources to support a government relations program?

Next, the business developer must acquire the knowledge necessary to enter the market.

- Identify government agencies with upcoming projects and available funding for that work.
- Analyze the current political landscape: the power structure, the influencers involved, and the likelihood that current trends will continue.
- Develop a list of decision makers you would like to target. They can be politicians and candidates themselves but often include advisors, campaign managers, and other behind-the-scenes influencers.
- Become familiar with the political process. Procurement and campaign finance laws differ by state and specify whether donations come from individuals, corporations, or political action committees. In some states, simply making phone calls is considered lobbying and requires registration. The law, in conjunction with a firm's corporate philosophy, ultimately drives any government relations program. Know the law and follow it—the need to respect, understand, and truly enjoy the political process is paramount for success.

Pursuing government work: what to expect

PULL QUOTE: The only thing in politics that is constant is change. But change can be a good thing. Today's political influencers may be tomorrow's corporate leaders and community activists. Take time to engage them with long-term relationship building in mind.

Political activity provides visibility. It puts your firm in front of people and supports a dialogue for a better understanding of project opportunities, including the objectives of a project, the power structure behind it, and perhaps even insight into potential funding sources.

It is important to recognize that there is no quid pro quo in pursuing government work with specific parties or candidates. Political activity is much more than offering campaign donations; the network gained is the most valuable aspect of such activity. Elected officials, just like decision makers in the private sector, want to work with people they know. The only difference is the rules of engagement that apply.

It is important to be active and seen in civic activities and public affairs, but be prepared for the risks of public perception. Political donations are a matter of public record, so balance your firm's commitment of time and resources with the amount of public perception risk you are willing to take.

Regardless of perceptions, supporting candidates is a reality. If you want to be successful in this, it is essential to set aside personal political beliefs and ensure that personal affiliations are unknown. Be discreet and strategic in whom you support and how you invest time and resources. Support for political leadership on both sides of the aisle is often a key to success, especially given that the political landscape is constantly in flux.

So what to do in times of political change? Be realistic about who will win (despite your personal beliefs). Invest in who will be successful, and hedge your bets with the eventual “losers”—even those who don’t win an election often end up in some other decision-making position in the community. Also, gain an understanding of how government works at the bureaucratic level; politicians come and go, but the basic machinery of state and local governments remains fairly consistent.

Sometimes it pays to get advocates engaged on your behalf. Hiring a former government employee who knows the subtleties of the department or agency you are targeting is no different than hiring a university architect for his or her knowledge of a certain campus or institution. Law/public affairs firms can make valuable introductions and shorten the time required for your firm to become visible, thus shortening the entire business development cycle. Knowing when to retain the services of a public affairs consultant can be tricky, but the following guidelines generally apply:

- when you are unfamiliar with the local or current political landscape
- when the size of a project is large enough that there are multiple, complex layers of decision makers (which requires multiple layers of relationships that extend beyond your networks)

Most important, pursuing government work at any level is more about business than any political ideology and should be approached as such. Government works in many complex layers; the keys to winning work are patience, respect for the process, connectivity, and meaningful, long-term relationships.

About the contributor

[RATIO Architects, Inc.](#) is an award-winning design and planning firm. Its collaborative studios combine professionals from all disciplines to work on education, community, workplace, lifestyle, and cultural projects. Under the marketing leadership of Tim Barrick, FSMPS, and Tony Steinhardt, FSMPS, CPSM, RATIO has grown from a small Midwestern studio to a multi-office firm working internationally.

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