

Ten Ways to Convert Legislators into Arts Advocates

Typically, most legislators will not have thought much about the arts during the election campaign. But once in office, with the charge to represent their constituents, politicians need to hear from arts advocates so that they will understand the value of the arts in their communities and see the strength of support for the arts from their constituencies.

ONE

Stand up at election time and begin educating politicians before they take office. Participate in candidate forums, town meetings and “meet and greet” parties in your neighborhood. Confront the candidates. Educate them on the role the arts play in their communities. Ask the candidates where they stand on issues of public arts policy.

Then go another step: **Contribute to the campaigns** of legislators you support and who support the arts. Your financial contributions can help to elect public officials who are advocates for the arts.

TWO

Get to know your legislators from the beginning. This might seem simple, but it’s essential. Most legislators will be new to the issues of public support for the arts. Some of them will be appointed to committees that handle arts legislation and budgets. It is incumbent upon the advocates—the experts in arts policy—to be available from the beginning of a legislator’s career with helpful information and good counsel.

THREE

Lead an orientation briefing on state arts issues for legislators and their staff. Familiarize them with the state arts programs, policies, and budgets.

FOUR

Involve legislators personally with the arts in your state. Invite legislators to performances and exhibitions, and make a point of introducing them and acknowledging their attendance.

Make every arts event an advocacy event. With performances, festivals and exhibitions, the non-profit arts community serves up what every politician wants: the chance to appear before a group of constituents. Make the opening night, for example, of every performance or exhibition function as an advocacy event as well by inviting a politician to attend.

By attending an arts event, a politician is personally exposed to the importance of an arts organization in the community. The legislator will probably see friends and supporters at the event and realize the arts interest in the community. An invitation to an arts event can help to develop a relationship with the politician. And it is a perfect time to thank the invited officials in public view for their support of the arts.

FIVE

Provide art for display in legislators’ offices. Help them cover the blank walls in their new offices with art and posters from their constituents to emphasize the vitality of the arts in their home communities.

SIX

Arrange a meeting for your legislators with the arts leaders in their communities, especially those who are active politically and may likely have contributed to that politician's campaign. Make the connection between the arts constituency and the legislator's friends and supporters in the community.

SEVEN

Invite a legislator to address a conference on the arts, or to write a column for your newsletter. Your request will force that politician to focus thoughts on your issues and, in the process, become better informed about the arts in your state. Offer exposure through your publication to that senator or representative and build a stronger advocate at the same time.

EIGHT

Look for a good excuse to contact your legislators, even when you are not asking for something. Send your legislators a copy of your annual report, a guide to your programs, or your calendar of events. Put them on your mailing list. Seize the opportunity to show your legislators what you do and to remind them who you are. This way, you work to establish a relationship for that time when you need something from your legislators.

NINE

Use your politicians as arts presenters. Contact legislators with an offer to bring performing artists or art exhibitions to the state capitol for special occasions. Connect the arts at home with opportunities to present the arts where your legislators work.

TEN

Link public arts funding to other issues in education, social concerns and economic and commercial development. Give a larger dimension to your advocacy for the arts by broadening the discussion to embrace other issues. Demonstrate how the arts can address urban problems, improve performance in other academic subjects, lower school drop-out rates and add to the economy of the state.

Government spending on the arts increases when legislators understand how the arts can help them advance their particular policy agendas. State funding for the arts, and federal arts money too, have increased as advocates have successfully demonstrated the benefits of the arts investment in economic, social and educational terms.

The arts give policy makers the tools for solving problems in creative and cost-effective ways. Advocates can draw on a wealth of research demonstrating the arts' role in improving student learning, in helping to build the economic strength of a community by promoting tourism, and in attracting businesses to expand local job opportunities.

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For more resources on building legislative support for the arts, see NASAA's list of advocacy publications, www.nasaa-arts.org/publications/advo.shtml.