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Testimony tips:

What you need to be prepared

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The mere thought of appearing before a legislative body can give even the most accomplished expert some pause.

There's a good reason for that. Marshalling your facts isn't all you'll need to marshal your confidence in this high-stakes game of influence.

Legislative hearings are not judicial proceedings and the advocate who expects a careful balancing of viewpoints, presided over by a benevolent, impartial authority, is likely to be disappointed.

However, those invited to testify to Congress or to state legislative bodies do play an important role in shaping decisions.

This most democratic method of taking the pulse of the citizenry survives and is even revered still, even in the age of instant messaging. It's also true however that today's legislative messengers probably have a harder time being successful at legislative hearings than ever before.

With the pace and the volume of information now available, it isn't easy distinguishing one's point of view, much less breaking through resistance or ambivalence

So how does one become successful and delivering testimony? By taking heed of the age-old tools of persuasive rhetoric: logic, legitimacy and passion. Some tips to remember:

#1 Do your homework:

Preparation is crucial. You'll need to not only know your issue, but the players who'll be considering it. Find the 'legislative lead dog' on your issue and work with their staff in preparing your most effective testimony.

#2 The facts actually don't speak for themselves:

Understand that you haven't been invited to testify so that you can offer a torrent of unrelated data. You've been invited to offer your perspective on the facts. That means you'll have to distill your message to two or three major points, stated powerfully and succinctly, and then support each with a few key verifying pieces of evidence. That's called messaging. Don't set foot in a legislative hearing before you've learned to do it.

#3 Know how to say it:

Be respectful at all times in these venues and don't take remarks others make personally. Assume good intentions. That means not only keeping your cool but addressing your remarks to all who are listening, introducing yourself, maintaining eye contact as much as possible, being properly dressed, well-spoken and well-prepared. Abide by time limits, ignore all distractions, and never, ever interrupt.

#4 The personal is powerful:

Legislative testimony is first and foremost a reality check for lawmakers. It's a chance for those making the laws to hear directly from those impacted. That means real life stories that bring issues into a fuller picture are exceptionally valuable. Yes, back up your points with data, studies, or statistics, but don't forget to do it with a context. Become an effective (short) storyteller.

#5 Ready those answers:

Do prepare for questions by anticipating not only those that will be most likely, but also those that you'd least like to answer. Do keep answers short, to the point, and do NOT ask any member if he or she understood your point. Never 'wing it' or offer a guess. A simple, "I don't know" will suffice (especially when accompanied by a "but I can tell you this...")

Finally, remember the proverbial directions to Carnegie Hall: "practice, practice, practice!" You want to be so well prepared that you can set aside your printed remarks, submit them for the record, and then summarize them for the legislators listening.

Do remember to thank legislators for the invitation. As with any good guest, follow the rules and you're more likely to be invited back.

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