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## How to Win on Policy: Lessons from the World's Best Lobbyists

*Insights from Anthony Nownes' Total Lobbying*

For Agbiz members, the policy environment has rarely been more demanding. Land reform legislation, the National Water Amendment Bill, climate change policy, energy security, employment equity regulations and B-BBEE compliance – the list of policy files demanding attention grows longer by the month. In this climate, understanding how policy influence actually works is not an academic exercise; it is a commercial imperative.

A comprehensive study of lobbying in the United States offers insights that travel well across borders. Anthony Nownes' book, *Total Lobbying*, based on extensive interviews with practising lobbyists, reveals that effective policy advocacy follows patterns that are remarkably consistent, regardless of the political system. For South African agribusiness, these patterns hold valuable lessons.

### Lesson 1: Lobbying is fundamentally about information

The study found that a lobbyist's stock-in-trade is not access or connections, though both matter, but credible, well-researched information. Government officials need to make decisions in complex, technically demanding areas; they need data they can trust. Nownes summarises this through the "communications theory of lobbying" which treats political advocacy and public affairs as a strategic exchange of information. He states that "organised interests and their lobbyists... achieve influence in the legislative process by strategically providing information to change or reinforce legislators' beliefs about legislative outcomes, the operational effects of policies, and the electoral ramifications of their actions."

The book explains that legislators face uncertainty about how policies will work and how voters will react. Lobbyists reduce that uncertainty by offering three types of information:

- Policy-analytic information – about the economic, social, or environmental consequences of a proposal.
- Career-relevant information – about how a decision will affect an official's re-election or career prospects.
- Political information – about the status and prospects of a bill.

"Lobbyists often make their case by providing information to government decision makers, or to the public (if they are engaging in grassroots lobbying). The information, of course, is generally biased in the lobbyist's favour. Seldom, however, do lobbyists tell unabashed lies. Lying would be detrimental to a lobbyist's ability to retain access to government decision makers."

When Agbiz submits well-researched policy analysis, presents evidence-based submissions to parliamentary portfolio committees, and provides expert testimony on proposed regulations, it is doing precisely what the most effective lobbying organisations do: reducing uncertainty for decision-makers.

### Lesson 2: The most effective advocacy is preventive

Nownes' research shows that lobbyists are far more successful when they identify and address policy threats before they become law. Once a bill is passed, reversing it is exponentially more difficult. One lobbyist put it bluntly:

"It is always much easier to stop something than to start something. So much of what we end up doing is playing defence – playing goalkeeper rather than power forward."

Another respondent echoed the same sentiment:

"One thing that may be a recurring theme in your research is that we are often on defence more than we are on offence on behalf of our clients... Sometimes in doing defence, the defence is to try to defeat a piece of legislation or change the focus of a proposal or redirect it in a way that might be more helpful."

The book illustrates this with a cautionary tale. A lobbyist for an architectural association admitted that he overlooked a state bill that later became law:

"I had to do a major fix this year because of a change in the state law last year that I and really a lot of other people did not catch... it has screwed some architecture firms."

This is why monitoring, tracking proposed legislation and regulations early, is so critical. Agbiz's legal intelligence division, its parliamentary liaison function, and its participation in Nedlac and other consultative structures all serve this preventive purpose. The challenge is to ensure that monitoring is comprehensive, timely, and translated into action before positions harden.

### **Lesson 3: Coalitions amplify influence**

The study found that joining forces with other organisations is one of the most effective lobbying techniques. Policymakers respond to broad-based support. Nownes writes:

"Joining into a coalition with other organized interests increases an organized interest's resource base...[and] shows policymakers that a lobbyist's position is popular."

One of the lobbyists interviewed explained the logic:

"If you can say, 'Mine is not the only organisation that wants this; there are 28 others as well,' it helps assure policymakers that a particular position has wide support."

Agbiz's strategic alliances –, with BUSA, BASA and with many other industry bodies – are not merely diplomatic gestures; they are instruments of influence. A united voice carries far more weight than scattered individual submissions. Importantly, this coalition-building often extends well beyond the agricultural sector. Many of the policy challenges facing agribusiness, from water reform and energy security to employment regulations and climate adaptation, are cross-cutting issues that affect mining, manufacturing, retail, and finance alike. By forging common cause with these diverse sectors, Agbiz has the opportunity not only to amplify its own message but also to demonstrate to policymakers that the positions it advocates are not narrow sectoral interests but reflect broader economic realities. This increases political leverage and makes it harder for decision-makers to dismiss or ignore the concerns raised.

### **Lesson 4: Personal relationships remain paramount**

Despite technological advances, the study found that face-to-face meetings with decision-makers remain the single most effective lobbying technique. Nownes states:

"The data show that lobbyists of all kinds rely primarily on two techniques: meeting personally with legislators and/or their aides and meeting personally with executive agency personnel."

Why are personal meetings so effective? The book offers three reasons:

- They allow efficient information exchange.
- Officials prefer doing things for people they know and like.
- They give lobbyists the chance to listen as well as talk – to hear what is really going on.

A procurement lobbyist captured the essence:

“Over time you develop relationships with people. My job is relationships, relationships, relationships.”

Agbiz’s ongoing professional interaction with government departments is not window-dressing, it is the bedrock of effective advocacy.

### **Lesson 5: Play defence, not offence**

The research found that it is significantly easier to block unwanted policy than to force new policy through. This is a sobering insight. As noted above, lobbyists repeatedly emphasised that playing defence is much more likely to succeed. Nownes writes:

“The data unequivocally show that public policy lobbyists are much more successful when they ask the government not to do something than when they ask the government to do something.”

This means that the most successful lobbying organisations spend substantial energy on monitoring and early intervention; identifying threats and neutralising them before they gather momentum. For Agbiz members, this reinforces the importance of vigilance: the policies that harm agribusiness are often those that were not spotted early enough.

### **What this means for South African agribusiness**

South Africa’s lobbying environment is, in one respect, quite different from the American context: it is largely unregulated. There is no comprehensive legal framework governing lobbying activities, no mandatory disclosure requirements, and no clear definition of what constitutes lobbying. This lack of regulation creates both opportunity and risk. The opportunity is that well-organised advocacy can be highly effective without the burdens of extensive compliance. The risk is that policy capture, where decisions are shaped by a narrow set of interests, becomes a real concern.

For Agbiz members, the message is clear. The organisation’s policy advocacy function – its engagement with Parliament, its submissions to government departments, its participation in Nedlac and other structures – is not a peripheral activity. It is central to protecting and advancing the commercial interests of agribusiness. The agricultural sector faces headwinds: policy uncertainty, infrastructure constraints, biosecurity challenges, and a complex regulatory environment. In this environment, effective advocacy is not optional.

The research from *Total Lobbying* suggests that the most effective organisations are those that are proactive, well-informed, collaborative, and relationship-focused. They monitor relentlessly, they intervene early, they build coalitions, and they invest in personal relationships with decision-makers. They understand that lobbying is not about pressure, it is about persuasion, grounded in credible information.

For Agbiz, the foundation is already in place: a strong parliamentary liaison function, deep relationships with government departments, and a proven track record of credible policy analysis. This represents a significant

competitive advantage for the sector. However, as the policy landscape grows more complex and the stakes continue to rise, the opportunity exists to build on this success. By deepening their engagement and strengthening their partnership with Agbiz, members can ensure that this advocacy function is not only sustained but scaled to meet the challenges ahead. The collective voice of South African agribusiness is its greatest asset, and with the continued backing of its members, that voice will remain clear, influential, and impossible to ignore.

In an era of profound policy change, the agricultural sector cannot afford to be a passive observer. The decisions being made in Parliament and government departments today will shape the operating environment for agribusiness for decades. The organisations that understand how policy is actually influenced, and that invest in doing it effectively, will be the ones that thrive.