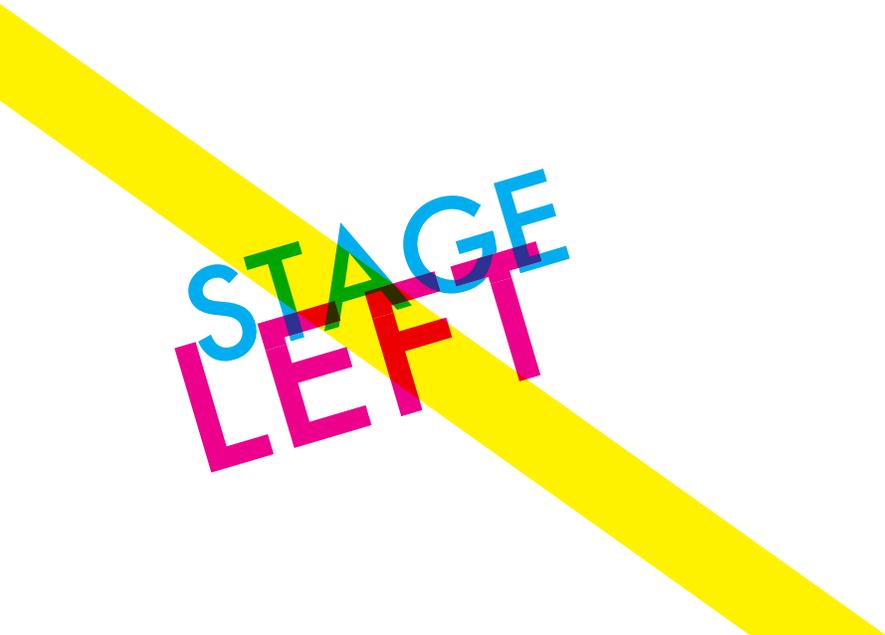


# THEATRE BAY AREA ARTS ADVOCACY ACTION GUIDE

by BRAD ERICKSON



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# ARTS ADVOCACY ACTION GUIDE

## WHY ADVOCATE?

Since the birth of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the mid 1960's, the public sector has played an important role in supporting theater and all the arts. While the amount of grants from federal, state and local governments tend to provide only a relatively small portion of a nonprofit art organization's total budget, those grants act as magnets for other income. Private foundations are encouraged to see grants from public agencies, and individual donors are also reassured to know that a theater company is receiving funds from the NEA, the state or the city arts agency. Research shows that an NEA grant attracts another eight dollars in funding for every one dollar granted by this federal agency. Support from public agencies is a cornerstone of many arts organizations' funding strategies. Advocating for continued and increased public sector investment in the arts is crucial to sustaining the work of artists and arts organizations in our communities.

This is particularly true in San Francisco and the Bay Area. Together, San Francisco arts organizations receive more than \$2 million in funding from the NEA each year—far more per capita than any other city in the nation. Total arts support from the City and County of San Francisco tops \$40 million annually. These funds are vital to the health and vibrancy of San Francisco's arts groups—and to the city itself. Advocacy by artists, arts groups and arts patrons is a must for ensuring these funds are sustained and increased over time.

## Getting Started as an Arts Advocate

Start by adding your name to the email list of an advocacy organization. Then respond to the action alerts. Learn more about the issues, and include your own facts and personal stories to bolster the arguments. Participate in an advocacy day or arts forum and join other artists and arts supporters in meeting with lawmakers to make the case. Get your whole organization, your whole artistic community, involved. When you feel ready, take a leadership role in an advocacy group in your community.

## WHAT IS ADVOCACY EXACTLY?

The dictionary defines advocacy as "the act of speaking, writing, or acting in support of something or someone." Advocacy is educating (explaining to policy makers the value of theater and the arts, using facts and statistics to bolster the argument). Advocacy is support or opposition to public policy stances. Saying the arts are valuable to individuals and communities and therefore deserve public support—city, state or federal—that is advocacy.

## WHAT IS LOBBYING?

Lobbying is trying to persuade a public policy decision maker to take a specific action. "We urge you to appropriate this amount of money to that particular agency or department," or "We urge you to vote yes (or no) on this specific bill." This is lobbying. So is encouraging people to vote for or against ballot initiatives.

Here are some examples: Speaking to a San Francisco Supervisor and urging them to vote

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for an appropriation of \$15,500,250 for the SF Arts Commission is lobbying (because you are backing a specific dollar amount). Saying to your Supervisor that it's important to fund the SFAC because it does important work for the city is advocacy (you are educating the Supervisor on the value of this city agency). Writing Senator Feinstein urging her to vote against a specific bill that would eliminate the NEA is lobbying. Writing to her and saying the arts are important to San Francisco and the support our arts groups receive from the NEA is crucial to our local arts ecology is advocacy. Sending a message from your organization to your email list urging your readers to vote yes on a local ballot initiative that would fund arts in the schools is lobbying (because in this case, a ballot initiative, the decision maker is the electorate). Sending an email to your list explaining the value of arts education in the public schools, that's advocacy.

## CAN I LOBBY?

Any private citizen can lobby. It's your right of free speech. Likewise, any organization can lobby. Even a nonprofit organization. Nonprofits may lobby, so long as you spend no more than 15-20% of your resources in the efforts (this is very hard for most producing arts nonprofits to do). On the other hand, there are no limits on how much a nonprofit can expend in terms of time, energy and money on advocacy. Pure advocacy is education. What nonprofits absolutely cannot do is get involved in partisan electoral politics. A nonprofit cannot endorse a political party or a particular candidate. A nonprofit cannot raise or give money to a party or a candidate. A nonprofit, or group of nonprofits, can hold candidates debates or forums—so long as all viable candidates are invited and treated equally. As noted above, a nonprofit can endorse a ballot initiative or proposition. The leader of a nonprofit, or any other staff member, can of course endorse and

even campaign for a party or candidate—as a private citizen—but not on behalf of the nonprofit organization where they work.

## HOW DO I ADVOCATE OR LOBBY?

### Get connected!

Join an organization involved in arts advocacy and get on it's email lists. In the Bay Area, local advocacy groups include: Arts Forum SF, Oakland Cultural Trust, and Theatre Bay Area. For state advocacy there is California Arts Advocates (CAA) and California Alliance for Arts Education (CAAE). Federal advocacy is led by Americans for the Arts (AFTA) as well as national service organizations like Theatre Communications Group (TCG).

Once you're connected to these groups, you'll receive regular updates as well as occasional "action alerts." To get started with advocacy, respond to these alerts. Generally, you will be encouraged to contact the appropriate elected official in a variety of ways: emailing, writing (faxing) a letter, or calling. Usually the advocacy group will provide contact information for the elected officials you're trying to reach. Very often there may be an email or form letter that will automatically send your message via the Internet or fax. Often, the advocacy organization will provide sample language that you can submit as is, or that you may revise and personalize. Responding to action alerts is simple, takes a tiny amount of time, and yet it can be very effective.

People ask what is the most effective way of advocating and the answer is the more personal your communication the more powerful it is. If you actually know the elected official, your personal communication will mean a lot, regardless of the medium. If you don't know the lawmaker personally—and most of us don't—then the more personal your message the more weight it will be given. A personal email is more impactful than a form email. A

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typed letter in your own words is even more weighty. Handwritten letters are even weightier. A phone call makes a difference, but a personal visit to the lawmaker or his staff conveys the most powerful message of all. That said, doing what you can—a quick email or phone call—can convey a great deal. It certainly conveys a great deal more than doing nothing at all! By contacting your lawmaker, whatever the medium, you are sending a message that says you care enough about this issue to communicate your feelings to your elected official—who needs your votes. Lawmakers really do take into account public feedback.

## ONCE YOU'RE CONNECTED, DIVE DEEPER!

### Testify:

In San Francisco and other Bay Area cities it is often possible to participate in public hearings on specific issues. County boards of supervisors, city councils and school boards all hold hearings where the public is invited to speak—to testify. So do public commissions. These public hearings can be a very powerful way of communicating to elected officials and showing community support or opposition to a proposed appropriation or public policy.

### Meet with lawmakers and their staff:

As a constituent you have a right to meet with your lawmaker and staff. If you represent a theater company or other organization, you speak on behalf of a local business and a larger community. Lawmakers and her staff will make time to hear from you (if you are persistent).

### Build a relationship with your lawmaker and their staff:

After you've met with a lawmaker or their staff, continue to stay in touch. This doesn't mean you must email them weekly, but do make a point of meeting with them on a regular basis, even

if that's once a year. Send them your company newsletter or annual report. Invite lawmakers and their staff to attend your performances. Go to events where the lawmaker is present and re-introduce yourself. Building a real relationship will pay off in terms of access to the lawmaker's time and their attention.

Take a leadership role in an advocacy organization: The advocacy organizations listed above are all nonprofits and are always looking for volunteer help and even board participation. Taking a leadership role in any of these organizations will give you a voice in crafting public policy positions, in planning advocacy strategies and in community mobilization. You will exponentially deepen your personal contribution to advancing arts-positive public policy at the local, state or federal levels.

Get your staff, board, and the rest of your organization's constituency to advocate with you: Your passion and commitment to advocating for the arts can be infectious.

## WHO CAN CONTACT A LAWMAKER?

The simplest answer is constituents. For the most part, elected officials are mainly interested in hearing only from citizens in their districts. You may have very strong feelings about a stance taken by a lawmaker in another state or another part of your city, but unless you can draw a direct connection to the legislator's electoral district, your views will hold little weight. If you live in the lawmaker's district, identify yourself as a constituent (you don't have to mention whether you voted for the lawmaker or not). If you live outside of the lawmaker's district, explain your connection. Maybe you work in their district, or your artistic programming is presented there. Maybe your audiences or your artists are drawn from her district. Whatever the connection is, make it known.

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## HOW DO I KNOW WHAT TO SAY?

### Email

If you are responding to an action alert from an advocacy organization, you will usually be given a format with arguments clearly laid out. Use this format, but feel free to revise and personalize it if possible. The more individual your message, the greater the value. But if you're strapped for time, it's best to just send the message written by your advocacy group. Weigh in!

### Letters

Very often advocacy groups, when they send out an action alert, will provide verbiage for mailed or faxed letters as well email messages. The same principle applies to letter writing as to sending emails. Use the language provided by the advocacy group, or, if you have time, craft your own letter, being sure to follow the basic arguments laid out by the advocacy organization. If you have facts to add or quick personal story to relate, do so. Generally letters should fit onto one page. Faxing is often the most efficient way to deliver the letter. This is especially true when writing Congress where stringent security procedures (following the anthrax scare from years past) add significant delays to posted messages. The staffs of most lawmakers will tell you that letters, especially letters that are personalized, carry more weight than email messages.

### Calls

Telephoning the lawmaker's office to weigh in on an issue is a quick way of conveying your support or opposition to a bill or public policy issue. You will speak to the lawmaker's staff. They are unlikely to engage in a policy debate with you, they will simply record your support or opposition to the issue at hand.

### Testifying

This is a very effective way of conveying your views and your arguments to a group of lawmakers, usually a committee or public commission of some kind. Just be prepared to wait. Hearings and commission meetings can be lengthy affairs. Follow these basic rules-of-thumb:

- Greet lawmakers courteously.
- Identify yourself, your affiliation, state if you are a constituent. If you don't live in the district, state your connection to the jurisdiction ("My company regularly performs in Oakland public parks.")
- Succinctly state your main message: ("I am testifying today in support of...")
- Follow arguments laid out by your advocacy group if possible. Add specific facts of your own. Tell a personal story. This is often the most powerful part of your message.
- Thank lawmakers for their time.
- You will typically be given between one and three minutes. Be brief! Practice and time your message.

### Legislative Visits

Contact the lawmaker's office to schedule an appointment (usually two to three weeks in advance). Start with an email or a fax. Then call. It may be necessary to follow up on this request several times before a time is confirmed. Be persistent, but courteous.

- At the meeting—be on time!
- Bring business cards—exchanging business cards is always the way these meetings begin.

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- Follow the basic rules-of-thumb for testifying
- Have no more than three main points. (“I am here today to support full funding for the NEA, continued support for arts education, and the creation of a cabinet level Secretary of Arts and Culture.”)
- Give arguments backed up by facts.
- Add a personal story. As mentioned above, this can be the most powerful and memorable part of your message.
- Have a specific ask. This might be, “We request that you support an appropriation of \$175 million for the NEA.” Or it might be as simple as, “Please come to our next performance.” But always have something specific you are asking the lawmaker to do.
- Offer to be an ongoing resource for the lawmaker. You can be a valuable window into the arts sector for the lawmaker and her staff. Invite the legislator (more likely his staff) to contact you for more information about the field or a particular policy issue. (“How many students would we reach if we increased San Francisco’s arts education budget by \$10 million?”)
- Leave some collateral. Use your visit as an opportunity to acquaint the lawmaker and his staff with your work and the community you serve. Bring your season brochure, a playbill, something that shows off your organization and your impact on the community.
- Thank lawmakers or staff for their time. Follow up with a thank you note (handwritten is best) or email.
- Go back at the next legislative cycle, or the next time a major bill affecting the arts is coming up for a vote. This builds the relationship.

## Participating in an Organized Advocacy Day

In Washington, your state capitol, or your local city hall, participating in an Arts Advocacy Day is important. Being part of these events visibly demonstrates the size and organization of our sector. Making legislative appointments at other times can allow more time to speak with the elected or their staff, and might be strategically timed to coincide with a specific issue or vote. Visiting the state or federal lawmaker in her home office can be just as effective as meeting with her in Sacramento or DC, and can certainly save time and money in travel.

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