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## Getting What You Want from the Government

Lobbying isn't just for big corporations. How one Vancouver entrepreneur pushed British Columbia to revise its regulations—and won

Alexandra Bosanac || August 19, 2015



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**B**efore B.C.'s rules around liquor licensing changed, Debra Lykkemark, owner of Vancouver-based caterer Culinary Capers, remembers how frustrating it was to work events where the alcohol flowed.

"Caterers were allowed to pour liquor, but we were not allowed to transport it for clients or make any money from it," she recalls. Clients were responsible for storing it and removing it from venues, and the penalty for breaking the rules was a fine up to \$100,000. "It was really inconvenient for clients," recalls Lykkemark.

The rules were lifted when the city of Vancouver hosted the 2010 Winter Olympics, which Culinary Caterers won a supplier contract for. Lykkemark hoped the change would be permanent; it was not. But that disappointment just served as motivation for a year-long push to get the province to change the rules governing alcohol, beginning in early 2012.

Here's what Lykkemark—who earned the **#90** spot on the **2015 PROFIT/Chatelaine W100 Ranking of Canada's Top Female Entrepreneurs**—learned about getting governments to cater to entrepreneurs' needs.

## DON'T RUSH TO HIRE A LOBBYIST

Lykkemark assembled a small group of industry friends, and the first thing the group did was to hire a professional lobbyist. He advised them to start a letter-writing campaign. Looking back, Lykkemark says it wasn't the best place to start. "Each caterer put in a thousand dollars and we ran out of that after [four] months," she says. "And we hadn't got the traction we had hoped for yet."

The lobbyist's strategy also required a significant investment of her time and energy. "I would just go to any meeting or any gathering (where the the ministers in charge of liquor licensing would be) and I'd have my letters with me," she recalls. "I tried to catch them at cocktail receptions and tried to get their card to send them stuff."

## SCOPE OUT WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

Lykkemark's efforts finally gained momentum after she was approached to join forces with the national restaurant association, which had already launched a campaign around the same issue.

"It would have been quicker if we had just gone right to Restaurants Canada," admits Lykkemark. "I would recommend that first you go look at the associations that you're involved with and find out if they already have a [dedicated] lobbying arm and I would go that route first. And if they don't, have them to recommend a lobbyist to you, because any of the bigger associations will probably have one."

## RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Teaming up with Restaurants Canada instantly connected Lykkemark to an influential network of people. "That was the real breakthrough. Mark Von Schellwitz [vice president of Restaurants Canada] knows everybody in the government to do with liquor or food," says Lykkemark. Von Schellwitz could easily get face time with people on the liquor board and in government, who already knew and respected him.

Knowing Von Schellwitz also secured Lykkemark a spot on the drafting committee. "I was actually able to come and help them design the new rules," she says.

## GET YOUR COMPETITORS ON YOUR SIDE

Initially, Lykkemark was concerned about pushback from other players in the restaurant and hotel industry, who she feared would oppose the idea of loosening up licensing rules. As it turns out, the opposite was true.

"The fact that we were able to get the restaurant association to back this idea was huge. That was because their members, restaurants and hotels, also wanted to be able to cater events off-site," says Lykkemark. "It made it easier for the government to make a decision on it because they didn't have to worry so much about the impact it would have on a hotel or a restaurant."

## MAKE SURE TIME IS ON YOUR SIDE

A looming provincial election forced Restaurant Canada to ramp up its lobbying. "It made us push really really hard just in case the government didn't get back in power," remembers Lykkemark. A few weeks before the election, a decision on liquor licensing rules was announced—and it was in Restaurants Canada's favour.

Lykkemark attributes their success to the fact that the group built a powerful lobby in time for the election. "You have an advantage if an election's coming up and you have a powerful cause because they'll be more open to getting that done for you because it'll sway more people to vote for them. But you don't want to do it without enough time,"



advises Lykkemark. "I think you need to allow a year or more to get something changed. You don't want to do it if they're going to be out of power in six months. And read all the business publications and newspapers to make sure you know what's going on."

## **PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT'S HAPPENING ELSEWHERE**

Being aware of what's happening in your industry is crucial. Change in one part of the country can be a boon to lobbying campaigns elsewhere. "Mark (Von Schellwitz), when he was working with us, would tell us about other provinces that have done this successfully. He would bring that up with ministers when he talked to them about and get copies of that legislation to show them what they did there," says Lykkemark.

Don't try to reinvent the wheel when there's already a template. "Check the other provinces and see what they've done and maybe you can find the template for your province—it does help," says Lykkemark.

## **HIT 'EM WHERE IT HURTS**

"When your writing your letters to your MLAs, don't just say you want this to change. You've got to give examples of how it hasn't served the province well, having these laws that don't make sense," says Lykkemark.

Appealing to the decision makers' self-interest is key. It helps if you can tell a bit of a story. Lykkemark had a particularly good one in her arsenal, related to an event she catered for Canada's provincial premiers. "It was B.C.-inspired menu with paired wines from B.C. and beer," recalls Lykkemark. The premier's office was in charge of purchasing the liquor and getting it to the venue, but when it arrived, the staff at the venue didn't know what event it was for, locking it up in a mystery location.

"So we get there and we've got two hours before the event and nobody can find the liquor and we have 350 people coming. We almost had to serve them Coke!" laughs Lykkemark. "An hour later, we found it. But that was an example that I gave when I wrote to the MLAs, to show them what can happen."

## **IT'S WORTH THE FIGHT**

Lykkemark can't recall exactly how she celebrated when she first heard that her industry had successfully lobbied the government. "I think there was a bottle of champagne involved," she laughs. Fast forward to today and business is better than ever. "This year is going to be the best year we've had since the Olympics and plus we're able to make a profit off of liquor so that has helped a lot with the profitability of the business. So yeah it's fantastic!"

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