

Convincing Political Stakeholders
2nd revised and extended edition

Chapter 1
Reading sample

1.3 Successful representation of interests in the complex EU decision-making system

1.3.1 Formula for success

The variables of successful political interest representation can be made tangible against the background of the changes and challenges in the complex political decision-making system of the EU outlined in the preceding sections. So how can the interests of companies and associations, for instance, continue to be successfully represented or supported? The author will answer this question using an illustrative formula – the “formula for success in interest representation” (see Figure 1.1). In addition to the scientific investigations into interest representation conducted by the author over the past decades, it is particularly his practical experience acquired during more than 30 years of successful interest representation at EU and at member state level that forms the background to the formula. The bases of the formula were established over 30 years ago by the author in his dissertation and have been further developed in numerous scientific works. The results of this work were published as a complete “formula for success” for the first time in 2015.

The short verbal version of this formula is as follows: the well-balanced interaction of content and process competence is the basic prerequisite for successful interest representation within the EU. However, this success can be further increased if success is also achieved in:

- (1) advocating the concern of an affected party whereby through a change of perspective the positive effects for the common good are shifted to the forefront, and
- (2) driving this affected party’s concern forwards in careful, detailed work day by day throughout the EU.

The practical implementation of this formula involves a governmental relations agency (governmental relations denotes a form of interest representation specialised in process competence, see Section 3.2.2 and Section 7.4.1.3.3.3) supporting the stakeholder (client) through the labyrinth of European politics as an independent intermediary – in addition to classic content-based interest representation through corporate representative offices, associations, public affairs agencies and law firms. The objective of this complementary approach is to change the previous perspective of a problem and discover ways to solutions. Instead of the previously usual “What do I want and why?” this approach shifts the focus to “Why should my concern interest the decision-maker?”.

The individual components of the formula (see Sections 1.3.2.4 to 1.3.2.7) and their application in practice are the subject of the example in Section 1.3.2.

[...]

1.3.2.6 Importance of perspective change competence (PCC)

Interest representation can only be successful if it is able to put itself in the situation and view matters from the perspective of the decision-makers involved – for example, the legislative or executive levels in political decision-making processes.

One of the core problems of communication (“translation conflicts”, see Chapter 2.1) between companies and politicians is that their representatives often view a matter exclusively from very different perspectives and are therefore unable to comprehend the problems of the respective other party – they then do not speak the same “language” and have no communicative common ground. One example: for homo economicus (businessman oriented towards benefit maximisation, see Chapter 4.8.1), more restrictive noise regulations mean that work at his company has to begin later but finish earlier – the company therefore suffers a financial loss. Conversely, for homo politicus (political decision-maker oriented towards the community, see Chapter 4.8.2) the same set of circumstances can mean that residents living in the vicinity of the company will be delighted about a higher quality of life – and vote him back into office at the next election. The involved actors (politics vs. business) that engage in a trade-off with one another therefore often pursue opposing objectives, represent different values or have different needs. Barriers to understanding and conflicts of interest are then bound to arise. Transferred to the interest representation procedure, a translation service (change of perspective) that enables the formation of differentiated opinions for all actors, above and beyond individual interests, is necessary for communication aimed at problem-solving across system and value boundaries.

[...]

The individual concern of an affected party (the avoidance of financial losses by a company as a consequence of specific legislation, for instance) can always be promisingly represented vis-à-vis the legislative and executive levels if the sender succeeds in adopting the perspective of the recipient in his content argumentation, takes his position into consideration and, if possible, even adopts his preferred use of language. This process is part of each successful change of perspective from the individual to the common interest perspective: it enables the lobbyist to abstract from his own (represented) particular interest and to communicate the respective concern such that it is of relevance to the addressed decision-maker.

A change of perspective must be undertaken at the very outset of an interest representation project to check whether the concern can at all be communicated in a promising manner in the “political reality”. In the day-to-day work of a governmental relations agency, this change of perspective takes place on an exclusively theoretical basis in an initial step – in a “steering committee” consisting of representatives of the affected party whose interests are being represented and representatives of the governmental relations agency. The permanent members of this committee include a member of the affected party’s corporate management level (C level, i.e. high-ranking management positions in the company), the head of the company’s specialist department and a governmental relations agency employee who is responsible for the project (“interface manager”). In the steering committee, the course of the decision-making process is simulated by hypothetically adopting the position of the relevant decision-makers. If a concern cannot be communicated in a manner that promises success, it is not pursued any further (see point “A” in Figure 1.7).

Further on, the steering committee can also be extended by project-related participants as required. In addition to further governmental relations agency employees, these can also include its structural advisors on the process competence side. The structural advisors are

often crucial to a successful change of perspective, since they have extensive knowledge of political decision-making processes (procedural issues) and are convincingly able to adopt the decision-maker perspective (legislative and executive) thanks to their expertise and political experience. On the content competence side, the steering committee can be supplemented by an association representative, a representative of a public affairs agency or lawyers with proven expertise in this issue, as the situation demands, in order to contribute additional content arguments. Depending on the complexity of the case, the steering committee can therefore comprise a variety of people.

[...]

At the end of the consultations in the steering committee, the company's management decides on the concerns for which a previously developed change of perspective appears promising. However, the decision can also be taken to not pursue a concern any further in this case (see point "B" in Figure 1.7). Experience shows that interest representation would be futile from the outset in up to 15 percent of cases, because no convincing arguments for the concern can be developed seen from the perspective of the key decision-makers. In these cases, the concern is not pursued any further. This often saves the affected company vast resources and enables strategic reorientation at this point in order to adjust to the new legal and factual situation.

However, it can also happen that the affected company is nevertheless obliged to put its concern to the legislative and executive level due to reasons of compliance: if, for instance, the company is listed on the stock exchange and has to prove to its shareholders that it has undertaken everything conceivably possible to assert its interests.

In at least 85 percent of cases, however, there is a predominant likelihood of success, because a convincing (from the perspective of the decision-maker) change from the individual to the decision-maker's perspective (common interest) is possible. The change of perspective therefore has to be specifically elaborated in a further step. In the case of a governmental relations agency, this is done using the OnePager Methodology, i.e. the holistic breakdown of a highly complex issue and its description in an addressee-friendly form on one single DIN A4 page. In the context of the overall interest representation strategy, the OnePager Methodology acts like a contrast medium: it makes the complex overall situation clearer, more distinct and more transparent for all parties.

The difficulty lies in condensing what are sometimes highly complex issues to fit on just one page. The addressee of the description has to understand as quickly as possible what it entails and what the importance of the concern or the respective issue being pursued has to his voters, institution, party and himself. In view of this, such a DIN A4 page (OnePager, see in particular also Section 7.4.2.1.7) is far more than a mere memo. Governmental relations agency specialists formulate the issue (broken down into "background – problem – solution", for instance) so that the decision-maker is enabled to adopt an overarching point of view from which common ground between different positions is revealed. The core element of a good OnePager lies in coherent and convincing arguments for the addressed decision-maker including a proposed solution as the result of a successful change of perspective. The OnePager is consciously not written from the perspective of the affected party's (particular) interest. For the decision-maker, a successful change of perspective results in an independent logic to take action – in the interest of the general populace, his institution or himself. The content and language of the OnePager are co-ordinated in the steering committee and, if required, adapted to changing circumstances during the decision-making process.

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As soon as success has been achieved in preparing a OnePager with an addressee-friendly and convincing change of perspective, the next step is to address the political decision-makers (through content competence and/or process competence representatives) and therefore undertake the final feasibility check. The interest representation process leaves the steering committee and reaches the legislative and executive sphere. In this, the governmental relations agency adopts the role of an independent intermediary (see also Sections 3.3.3 and 8.3.1.1) for the dialogue between the decision-maker and the affected party (a company, for example). Based on long-term experience, between two and five central stakeholders can be identified for the further procedure in the complex decision-making system with the aid of process competence. Ideally, each of these stakeholders will become an “endogenous process driver” by committing to the concern brought forward out of conviction and therefore of their own accord.

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