

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION 101

By Stephanie Vance

Deliver your message in a way that will make members of Congress and their staff sit-up and take notice! Members of Congress and their staffs are not mind readers. They won't know how you feel about an issue unless you tell them. But you have to be sure to deliver your message in the right way. Otherwise, your communication will be lost in the flood of mail, e-mail, phone calls, and faxes that come in to a Congressional office everyday. Following are some tips and techniques that will help ensure that your voice is heard above the fray.

Method of Communication

The methods of communication you chose should depend on the type of message. A simple request to vote for a particular bill can easily be relayed over the phone, while a more complicated message might better be put in writing. Think also about what works best for you in terms of time, energy, personal preference, and money.

Volume Does Not Necessarily Equal Effectiveness

Highly controversial issues that are national in scope can create a flurry of communications to Congress. Many offices consider the numbers when making a decision, but only to a point. In fact, one thoughtful and well-argued message from a constituent can have more of an impact than a thousand letters or calls.

Always Identify Yourself

It is a waste of time to communicate with your congressional office without identifying yourself. Unidentified information will generally be ignored and thrown away. Because the main duty of a congressional office is to represent the people who live in the congressional district, they need to know who is trying to communicate with them.

Be Specific

If you know of a particular bill, ask him or her to cosponsor. If your concern is with a federal agency action, ask him or her to send a letter. Whatever it is, the best way to ensure that the office pays attention to your issue is to force a decision.

Prioritize Your Requests

If you ask for too many things without making it clear what your top priorities are, the congressional office may feel overwhelmed. Let the office know what actions need the most attention or time your requests so that you are not asking for more than a few things at once.

Offer To Be a Resource

Congressional staff usually are not experts in the issue areas they cover and often turn to trusted outside experts. Knowing that there's someone in the district who really understands patent law, or ancient fishing rights, or how to build a widget can be very helpful. If you are an expert in your field, let your congressional office know that you can answer any questions they may have.

Be Polite

Treat the staff and the office with the same respect you expect. If you are disagreeable, it will make the staff far less likely to want to work with you in the future. You can be forceful about your views and opinions without being rude.

Be Patient and Follow-up

You should not expect an immediate response to your comments or concerns. In many cases, the issue may be one about which the member has not yet formed an opinion. Do, however, ask when you should call back to see if the member has taken a position.

Always Tell the Truth

Congressional staff turn to outside individuals for advice and assistance on important policy issues all the time. They must feel that they can trust the individuals with whom they are dealing.

Don't Vilify Your Opponents

At the very least, you should refrain from labeling those who disagree with you as unenlightened idiots. In fact, you can go even further by fairly presenting the other side's argument and then explaining why you have the stronger counter-argument. It's a great way to build trust, especially since the staff person you are dealing with most likely will hear from the other side. He or she will realize that you have developed your position based on a careful evaluation of the facts.

Don't Talk About the Campaign with Staff

Most congressional staff get very nervous or even offended when people they are meeting with mention the member's campaign. The laws against staff involvement in their member's campaign are very strict. The only exception is the chief of staff who, under law, is allowed to be involved in campaign related activities. In particular, any suggestion that the staff person's help on a legislative issue may translate into a campaign contribution is strictly forbidden. Such a suggestion may, in fact, make a staff person avoid helping you because they are worried it would look bad for their boss.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember in dealing with Members of Congress and their staff's is that **persistence pays**. In many cases, you may have to ask two, three, or even a dozen times before your congressional office is able to respond to your request. So keep plugging away - and happy advocating!

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