

## **EFFECTIVE MEETINGS**

by Stephanie Vance

In order to have an effective meeting, you must consider the context. As Clair Seaver, Executive Assistant and Health LA to Rep. Blumenauer (D-OR) points out, "The Congressman's schedule is chaotic. It changes from minute to minute and meetings are sometimes postponed or canceled all together. When the meetings do occur as planned, the Congressman often has only a few minutes to focus on the discussion. Being able to make the point quickly and succinctly is very important. It's particularly important to start the meeting with a request. That way, if you're cut-off you've at least put the most important point out there." Your job is to bring order to chaos by following these simple steps. Also, I've included some quotes from a Congressional staff survey that AdVanced Associates conducted to give you a behind the scenes glimpse into a Congressional office.

### **PREPARING FOR AN EFFECTIVE MEETING**

- Be cognizant of your representative's time limitations. Don't ask for more than one or two meetings per year. Sometimes your message is best delivered by phone or through a staff person.
- Decide where you want to meet (DC vs. the home office), after looking at the congressional calendar (see the House and Senate websites for links to the House and Senate calendars)
- Decide who should deliver your message. While those who run the program should always be involved in meetings with Congressional offices, some members may respond better to powerful figures in the community who support you. Above all, a real live constituent is absolutely critical.
- Limit the number of people you bring to the meeting. Most Congressional offices cannot fit more than five people.
- About one month before the proposed meeting time, fax the scheduler a meeting request, including a brief description of what you want to discuss and attendees. Meeting requests should always be made in writing, as the scheduler will have to pass the request along to several people before a decision is made. You can find phone, address and e-mail information from the House and Senate websites at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) or [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov). Or, call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 to be connected to your congressional office directly. Many offices do not post fax numbers.
- Follow-up with a phone call to the scheduler about one-week after sending a written request
- Send a "one-pager" about your program before the meeting, nothing more. Most staff and Members do not review materials before meetings - they expect YOU to brief them. *Quote from Congressional staffer:* "Be ready to talk on two levels: if I know a lot about your issue and if I know nothing."

### **CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING**

Believe it or not, Congressional offices are tiny! Even the most senior legislative aides share tiny cubicles with other staff. The telephones ring constantly and there are usually

at least five TVs blaring coverage of the day's floor debate. It can be very hard to focus on your comments when you are meeting in what may seem like a war zone. This is why it is so important for you to have thought about your message beforehand.

And don't be surprised if the dress code is sometimes a bit casual, especially if you're meeting with a staff person on a day when Congress is not in session. During recess periods, jeans and t-shirts are common. The rest of the time, more traditional business attire is the norm. For visitors, business attire is best - just to be safe.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you conduct your meeting:

*Quote from Congressional Staff:* "Come in laid-back. Yes, we work in an important field, but there is no need to be serious all the time. Make jokes and keep the presentations short and sweet. It's our job to know what you're talking about so no elaborate explanations; if we don't know, we'll ask you."

- Be flexible - your meeting may take place standing up in the hallway, on the run to a vote, or may be cancelled with no warning. Members have to deal with sudden and dramatic shifts in their schedules on a daily basis. Unfortunately, this can affect the people they are planning to meet with. *Quote from Congressional staffer:* "Even though the appointment is with the member, EXPECT to meet with staff only. 1) It will be a wonderful surprise should you get to meet with the Member. 2) The WORST thing you can do is act as though you are disappointed to be meeting with "just" me.
- Make sure you know "who's who" in the meeting, and take down the names of any staff people you may need to deal with in the future. *Quote from Congressional staffer:* "Always keep in mind what staff is thinking when you're visiting: Why are you here, what do you need from us and how is it relevant to the Congressman and the District? Is your request credible? If we do what you ask is this an easy win-win?"
- Leave behind short, concise, and consistent information. Instead of handing over a pile of propaganda, leave a list of resources such as articles and reports that your organization has available. That way, if the staff need more details, they know what information you have and where to find it. *Quote from Congressional Staffer:* "Be specific, brief and don't leave too much information or the main message will get lost in the volume of handouts."
- Leave your information in a file folder with your organization's name on the label. Be sure that your website, phone number, email and address are on every piece of correspondence you leave behind or send to the office.

#### FOLLOWING-UP AFTER AN EFFECTIVE MEETING

- Send a thank-you note to everyone in the office who attended your meeting.
- If you said you would send the office more information, send it! Always follow-through with the promises you make during your meeting.
- In the same respect, you should follow-up on any requests you made of a staffer. Often, they will not respond until you ask at least twice. However, don't make them do all the work for you. If you asked your Congressman to vote a certain

way, you can check how he voted online instead of calling the staff person. Save your phone calls for when they're really needed. *Quote from Congressional Staff.* "Be appreciative of staff if you've interacted with them before. Not necessarily that you need to bake cookies, but if someone was helpful or supportive it's nice to hear that it was noticed. This is especially good to let a Member know about his or her staff."

---Stephanie Vance, the Advocacy Guru, is author of "Government by the People: How to Communicate with Congress" and a former Capitol Hill veteran. She lives and works in Washington, DC, offering workshops and advice on effective advocacy. Find out more at [www.advocacyguru.com](http://www.advocacyguru.com).