



# **LOBBYING HANDBOOK**

## *HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH LEGISLATORS*

### **Why advocate?**

You have probably heard someone say, “Politicians will not listen to an average citizen. “ Or perhaps something along the lines of, “Politicians just like to sit around and argue with each other—they are completely ineffective.” Maybe you have even said these things to yourself. After all, it is accepted conventional wisdom that politicians are corrupt and the government is broken.

Think carefully about these perspectives, though, because there are two sides to every story. If part of the problem is that politicians are not listening, could a second part of the problem be that people are not speaking effectively? And while it is true that politicians do argue a great deal, is it not also true that this happens because our system of government was specifically designed to be slow moving, deliberate and argumentative? In a sense, it is reflective of the varying views and interests of the people, and it can be viewed as an opportunity rather than an obstacle to progress.

### **What influences elected officials?**

- Personal relationships: Friends, family and staff members have a tremendous influence on the day-to-day decisions of elected officials.
- The message: What you say to elected officials is actually important! Later sections of this document will help you develop a winning message.
- The media: Media coverage of events will often have an influence on what elected officials talk about in hearings and introduce as legislation.
- Party considerations: Elected officials are often swayed by what their political party’s priorities.
- Personal interests and passions: Every elected official has a policy issue or issues that they love. Effective advocates will identify those interests and then frame their message accordingly.

- Staff: It is critical to build good relationships and communicate effectively with members' staff, as they are generally responsible for approaching members about supporting issues.
- **Most important... their constituents:** The most common phrase heard in any elected official's office is "how does this impact my constituents?" It is the framework through which many or most decisions are made.

## KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT

### Why is it important to ask for something specific?

Asking for something specific is often the only way to get an elected official's attention. Your objective is to lead someone in the office to think about the issues that you have brought to his or her attention for longer than five minutes, and making a clear and concise "ask" helps you to achieve that goal. There are two key types of asks: policy and relationship-building.

- Policy asks are oriented around specific legislative or government initiatives (e.g., asking a member to support a particular bill, sign onto a letter, lead a particular legislative initiative, etc.). Your organization may have some "asks" for you to make.
- Relationship-building asks are things you ask for that are not necessarily policy-related, such as a site visit, but that may help you with policy asks in the future.

### What is appropriate to ask?

- Introduce, vote for or vote against legislation
- Cosponsor legislation introduced by someone else
- Send a letter to an agency about a concern you have or sign onto a letter drafted by another official
- Send a letter to another member of Congress in an influential position, such as a chair, or ranking member of a particular committee
- Send a letter in support of a grant application
- Assist you with finding and gathering research information from federal agencies and research services
- Submit a statement to the Congressional Record

### What is inappropriate to ask?

Elected officials cannot:

- Take a specific action in favor of you and your business
- Support legislation that is not within their jurisdiction
  - House members cannot cosponsor or vote for Senate legislation and vice versa (although they have the option of introducing companion legislation in the house in which they serve)
  - Federal representatives cannot cosponsor or vote for state level legislation
- Demand that a federal agency award you a particular grant

### **What is missing?**

People tend to think that elected officials pay attention only to those people who contribute to their election campaigns. However, what people fail to realize is that in many cases, the people that are contributing to a Congressman's campaign are doing so because they believe the Congressman will benefit some constituent interest. So when a particular interest group contributes to an elected official, they do so not because they are trying to "buy" the legislator's vote, but because they believe that member is more likely to take actions that will benefit the group's interest than someone from another state, region or background. In fact, most members of a Congressman's staff (who do most of the meetings with constituents) do not know who has made campaign contributions. That said, it is nearly impossible to erase people's skepticism about money. It is important to recognize that you have power as a constituent—and that power of constituency is valuable as you communicate with your elected officials.

### **Relationship building asks**

Sometimes, you may be in a situation where it is inappropriate to make policy-related asks. Say, for example, you have had a meeting in Washington, D.C. and the elected official has indicated they will think about what you have asked, but they will not be able to make a decision right away. While you want to be sure they know of your continued interest in the issue, you might want to consider making some "relationship building asks." Asking them to come see something in the district or to submit a statement for your website is a far more effective way to get them to continue thinking about the issue than simply sending them information.

The following are some "creative asks" that you might want to consider as you develop your relationships with your representatives:

- Visit people or places in the community that relate to your ask.
- Write an article for your newsletter.

- Submit a statement for your website or participate in an online discussion.
- Make a speech on the floor about your issues.
- Submit a statement to the Congressional Record.
- Attend a meeting or employee luncheon.
- Hold a town hall or community meeting on your issue.
- Submit an editorial on the issue to a local or national newspaper.
- Meet with you and other supporters in the district office.
- Use social media to communicate support for or information about the issue.

### KNOWING WHO YOU ARE TALKING TO AND WHY YOU ARE RELEVANT

Before you meet with your elected officials, you should take some time to learn about their interests so that you can frame your message in a way that is bound to get their full attention. You can organize your findings in an excel spreadsheet or other database and update and review it as needed. Here are five things you need to know before your meeting:

#### 1. Whose district or state am I in?

One of the most common questions asked in congressional offices is “Are they from the district?” Representatives and senators represent distinct groups of people and devote their energy to the requests and needs of those individuals. Members of the House represent all the people (usually around 650,000) who reside in a separate and distinct geographic area called a congressional district. Senators represent an entire state. Hence, every American in the 50 states has one representative and two senators who are responsible for representing their views in Congress.

In general, you should stick to contacting your own representative and senators, unless you can demonstrate that you represent the concerns of people who live in another district. If you contact other members of Congress, do not be surprised if your phone calls, letters and/or requests for meetings are referred to the representative or senator who serves the area or state where you live.

#### 2. What is the member’s legislative record?

What does she or he care about? Most members have a record, reflected through votes, of formal support for legislation that has been introduced by other members (called cosponsoring

a bill), and legislation that they have introduced themselves on virtually every issue under the sun. Before your meeting, know where she or he stands on issues with which you are concerned. You can visit AWI's Compassion Index for more information at [www.compassionindex.org](http://www.compassionindex.org).

### **3. What committee or committees is my legislator on?**

Members are assigned to committees based on their interests, their districts (or states, in the case of the Senate), and for the more competitive major committees, on how long they have served (seniority). Members usually serve on one to three committees. A member's ability to influence legislation depends largely upon whether she or he is a member of the committee of jurisdiction. In addition, knowing the committee assignments of your member of Congress can give you insights into the issues that interest him or her and into how she or he will be most effective in helping you.

### **4. Where is she or he on the seniority scale?**

All members of Congress, both House and Senate, are ranked on a scale of seniority, based upon when they were elected to that office. If your representative is relatively new to office, the unfortunate fact is that she or he is not going to be able to move as many legislative initiatives or secure as many appropriations dollars as a more senior member might be able to. However, if your member is a committee chair or ranking member, or a member of the leadership, you are in luck. These individuals have a great ability to move policy proposals through the legislative process.

### **5. What party does she or he belong to?**

Members help all constituents, not just those who are members of their political party (as some people believe). After all, your representative has been elected to represent you and your interests, regardless of your party affiliation. However, it is important to know the member's party affiliation to determine if they are part of the majority or minority party in Congress. While many members are seeking to work collaboratively and across party lines, members of the majority party still have an advantage in efforts to get legislative proposals passed.

The fastest way to gather this information is to hop on the Internet. Use [www.compassionindex.org](http://www.compassionindex.org) to see if your member has cosponsored any legislation related to your issues of concern. The site has a searchable database that includes information on all of the bills introduced in a particular session. It can also be useful to know which issues are important to your members of Congress. Find out the interests of a particular member of Congress by visiting his or her individual website, which can also be accessed through [www.compassionindex.org](http://www.compassionindex.org).

**Note:** The bills are designated either House of Representatives (H.R.) or Senate (S.) depending on the house of Congress in which the bill originated. Sometimes similar or identical “companion” bills are introduced in both houses.

## GENERAL MESSAGE DELIVERY TIPS

### Telling a personal story

The most important thing to remember in developing and delivering a message for your elected official is that you have something of value to contribute. In fact, you are one of the most important people with whom the member of Congress or his or her staff will meet that day because you are a constituent and/or you represent the concerns of constituents.

Your job in your meeting is not to present as many facts and figures as you can about your issue. Rather, your job is to make the issue relatable for the elected official or staff person. You can achieve that goal by telling a personal story.

Think about it: there is some reason why you have decided to be an advocate on your issues of concern. It likely impacts you directly in some deeply personal way. That is the message you need to relay to your elected officials.

They will get all the facts, figures and statistics from your talking papers, as well as the national organization (where applicable). What you bring to the table is a compelling story about the impact of policy issues on people who the member of Congress represents.

### Questions and ideas to consider as you develop and articulate your personal story

1. Why did you become an advocate?
2. How do the issues you are discussing impact you directly?  
(Do they cost you money? Do they impact your health or the health of loved ones? Do they conflict with your organization’s core mission? Do they affect your business or otherwise impact your ability to do your job?)
3. Do you have clients, customers, friends, family or colleagues with compelling stories?  
(Have they benefited from your services? Contributed to your cause? Joined your campaign because of their own strong views or unique experiences?)
4. How do these people and others connect to the Congressman’s district?
5. Take a few minutes to weave these questions into an anecdote.

## **Being a resource**

In addition to telling a personal story, you should act as a resource for the congressional office. There is no way to relay everything you know about an issue in a fifteen-minute meeting. What you really want to convey is that you know a great deal about the issue and, in particular, that you know about how the issue impacts people in the district or state. Because they must, by necessity, be generalists, congressional staff often turn to trusted outside experts for information. If you are an expert in your field, let the office know that you are available to answer any questions they may have.

## **Ten tips for effective messages**

You need to deliver your message in a way that will make members of Congress and their staff sit up and take notice. In addition to the approaches noted above, below are ten tips that will help your message stand out among the hundreds that pour into a congressional office every day.

### **Tip #1: Always identify yourself**

It is a waste of your time to meet with your elected officials without making it clear how you are connected to the district or state that they represent. If you are affiliated with a national organization, it is not enough to simply state the organization's name. The official and staff will be more likely to focus on your issue if they know how they relate to their constituents.

### **Tip #2: Leave behind materials**

You will definitely want to leave something behind, and it is possible that the organization you represent will have informational materials for you. Whatever you leave behind, be sure to leave your business card clipped to the informational material. Otherwise, elected officials and their staff may not remember which organization you represent or how best to contact you for additional information.

### **Tip #3: Be specific**

Too often, congressional offices receive vague, unspecific comments like "we should pay less in taxes," or "the EPA should stop picking on my business." These types of messages usually receive a very pro-forma response, something along the lines of "thanks, I will keep your views in mind." To be more effective, you must ask your representative to do something specific related to your position.

### **Tip #4: Prioritize your requests**

If you ask for too many things without making it clear what your top priorities are, the congressional office you are talking to may feel overwhelmed and be unable to identify a few

key areas on which to expend limited staff resources. Let the office know what action needs the most attention in the short term. Better yet, try to time your requests so that you are not asking for more than a few things at once.

**Tip #5: Don not vilify your opponents**

It is important to refrain from labeling those who disagree with you as uninformed and careless or otherwise denigrating them. In fact, it is often helpful grant the credibility of opposing views. If you do so, congressional staff are more likely to recognize that you have developed your position based on a careful evaluation of the facts. This is not to say that you should not feel passionately about your position, but it is critical not to give congressional staff the impression that the facts you have presented are colored by your intense feelings.

**Tip #6: Be polite**

You know the old adage: you get more flies with honey than with vinegar. That applies to your dealings with people in congressional offices as well. During your meetings, you should always be polite. Treating the staff poorly, arguing with them, suggesting that they are uninformed, or becoming confrontational will not further your cause. Even though you may be frustrated with government, try not to treat every meeting as an adversarial situation. Treating staff poorly will not only hinder your ability to achieve your objectives with respect to the issue at hand, but will also interfere with your ability to work together in the future.

**Tip #7: Be patient**

You should not expect an immediate response to your comments or concerns. In many cases, the issue may be one that the member has not yet formed an opinion about. That said, it is perfectly appropriate to ask when you should call back to see if the member has taken a position. In fact, if you make it clear you are going to follow-up, they will be more likely to focus on your “ask.”

**Tip #8: Do not make ultimatums**

The statement “if he/she does not agree with me on this issue, I will not vote for them” carries very little weight in a congressional office. For every person making that statement on one side of any issue, there is often another person making the same statement on the other side. Frankly, it is impossible to satisfy people who base their decisions on only one issue, and most congressional offices will not bend over backwards to try.

**Tip #9: 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. Accordingly, it is important to ensure that all information that you provide is accurate and up-to-date, and to avoid exaggerating, misstating facts, or otherwise misrepresenting information relevant to the issue at hand.

**Tip #10: Do not talk about the campaign with staff**

Most congressional staff get very nervous when people they are meeting with, from lobbyists to constituents, mention the member's campaign. Some staffers may actually be offended. The laws against staff involvement in their member's campaign are very strict and wandering into any gray area can put both the member and the staff person at risk of violating federal election laws. Penalties range from fees to jail time. In particular, any suggestion that the staff person's help on a legislative issue may translate into a campaign contribution is strictly forbidden. It is illegal, unethical and immoral for the congressional office to take specific actions in exchange for campaign contributions. Such a suggestion may, in fact, make a staff person avoid helping you because they are worried it would look bad for their boss.

## MEETINGS WITH STAFF

### Effective meetings

When you walk into a congressional office, do not be surprised if it feels somewhat chaotic. The telephones ring constantly, televisions show the day's floor debate, and staff are hurrying from one meeting to another. This is why it is so important to prepare your talking points in advance.

The person at the front desk (usually a staff assistant) will greet you. Let them know that you are there for a meeting and who the meeting is with (sometimes your meeting will be with a staff person opposed to a member). Then they will ask you to either have a seat in the office lobby or, if there is no space, ask you to wait outside. The staff assistant will let the person with whom you are meeting know that you have arrived and that person will come out to greet you and start the meeting.

### Here is a good way to approach the meeting:

- State who you are and make the district connection: For example, my name is XX and I am from the XX organization in the Congressman's district
- Explain why you are there: We are hoping that the Congressman will support H.R. 1234, which would do X, Y and Z.
- Explain why it is important to you (this is where your personal story comes in): H.R. 1234 is important to me because it [saves me money, protects the environment, etc.].

- As necessary and appropriate, refer to the materials that you will be leaving behind (but do not read them to the staff people).
- Ask if the Congressman has taken a position on the issue (the answer will often be “no.”)
- Let them know that you are available to be a resource and that you will follow up to see if there are questions and/or if the Congressman can support your position. Be sure to ask the best way to follow-up (phone, e-mail, or meeting) and collect all contact information.
- Remember to write thank you notes to staff following meetings.

### **Congressional staff**

- Staff Assistant – Most House offices have one staff assistant. Most Senate offices have at least two. They handle the front desk duties, including answering phones, greeting visitors, sorting mail, coordinating tours, and in some offices, handling a few policy issues.
- Scheduler/Executive Assistant – This person schedules the Congressman’s time. In many offices, they may also handle an issue or two.
- Legislative Assistant (LA) – Legislative assistants handle the bulk of the policy work in a congressional office. A House office usually will have two to four LA’s and a Senate office will have from three to as many as twelve (depending upon the state’s population).
- Legislative Director (LD) – In some cases, the person who handles your issue may also be the legislative director who, in addition to handling policy issues, also oversees the legislative staff. There is usually just one legislative director in each congressional office.
- Legislative Correspondent (LC) – You also may be referred to a legislative correspondent who, in addition to drafting letters in response to constituents’ comments and questions, also generally handles a few legislative issues. Most House offices have one or two LCs. Senators have three to five, depending on their state’s population.
- Press Secretary/Communications Director – This individual is responsible for fielding all calls from the media and is often the spokesperson for the office. House offices usually have one designated press person. Senate offices have two to five.
- Chief of Staff/Administrative Assistant – The chief of staff or administrative assistant oversees the entire operation. The chief of staff may sometimes handle a few policy issues, but generally his or her time is spent managing the office.

### **Tips on working with congressional staff**

- 1. Remember, your issue is one of many**

Issue assignments in congressional offices are generally based on what individual staff people are interested in and what they are knowledgeable about. In a House office, each staff member might be assigned five to fifteen issues. Senate staff may specialize in a specific issue. Because someone is assigned a particular issue, however, does not mean she or he is an expert. Generally, environmental LAs do not have degrees in ecology, health care LAs are not doctors, transportation LAs are not traffic engineers, etc. Rather, the issue area assignments help designate who the ecologists, doctors, and traffic engineers should talk with about particular policy proposals. The staff person's job is to sift through the information relevant to a particular issue or proposal—which can be a challenging task as it often requires review of a broad range of information, including contradictory sources—to provide advice to the member on the policy issues for which that staff person is responsible.

## **2. Staff contact has advantages over member contact**

Staff can take a little more time to delve into a particular issue and gain a greater understanding of why what you are proposing is such a great idea. With a little work on your part, they can become advocates for your cause within the congressional office.

## **3. Expect (and appreciate) youth**

Most congressional staffers are rather young, but do not let that throw you. In most cases, staffers are bright and capable individuals who can be trusted to respond appropriately to your requests and deliver your message to your representative or senator.

## **General tips for meetings**

### **1. Be on time**

Staff and members often schedule their meetings in 20-minute increments back-to-back. If you are 15 minutes late, you will only get five minutes. If you are 20 minutes late, you have lost the opportunity and will need to try to reschedule. If you are part of a group and one of your meetings is running late, split up. It is better to have part of the group show up on time for the next appointment than to have everyone show up 20 minutes late.

### **2. Do not arrive too early**

House and Senate offices typically do not have large waiting areas. If you arrive well ahead of your planned meeting (say 20 minutes to half an hour) you may have to wait standing up or in the hallway. It is best to arrive about five minutes before the scheduled meeting time.

### **3. Be flexible**

A number of things may happen that might seem unusual, like being asked to meet standing up in the hallway. The member may be called away to vote during your meeting. You may have a meeting scheduled with the member, but due to last minute changes in the schedule, you may find you are meeting with a staff person.

- **Hall Meetings:** Do not be insulted if the staff suggests a hall meeting. It simply means that either the office is too small for the number of people in your group or another meeting is already using the one available meeting space.
- **Voting:** You may find that the member has to leave in the middle of your meeting to go vote. This means that the member has only about 15 minutes to get to the House or Senate floor and record his or her vote. No proxies are allowed, and if the vote closes before the member makes it to the floor she or he is marked as “not voting.” Although this is difficult to avoid, since votes can occur at any time, they are generally less likely to occur before 11:00 A.M.

#### **4. If you cannot attend, call the office to cancel**

It is surprising how many people feel that they do not need to call to cancel meetings they have set up with congressional offices. If you are not able to make a particular meeting, and you are the only one assigned to go, it is common courtesy to cancel. If there are other people scheduled to go, check with them to make sure that someone will be attending.

#### **5. The five-minute rule**

You must prepare to deliver your message powerfully and effectively in no more than five minutes. With the possible interference of votes, schedules running late, and last-minute emergencies that may be all the time you will have.

### **Top 10 List—Things elected officials’ staff hate to hear**

#### **Number 10: But I thought my appointment was with the Senator.**

Never, ever indicate that you are disappointed to be meeting with a staff person. On Capitol Hill, having a good relationship with a staff person can make or break your cause.

#### **Number 9: Here is some reading material for you—our 300 page annual report.**

When meeting with a member of Congress or staff person, try to limit your leave-behind materials to one or two pages, and include details on where this information can be located online, if appropriate. Offering the information in a folder with your organization’s name on the label will help ensure that the materials are put in a file drawer, as opposed to the trash.

**Number 8: How much of a campaign contribution did your boss get to vote against (or for) this bill?**

Believe it or not, most staff have no idea who contributed to their bosses' campaigns. Not only is this question insulting, but also futile, as the staff person is unlikely to know.

**Number 7: I assume you know all about H.R. 1234.**

With thousands of bills being introduced during each Congress, no staff person will be able to keep them all straight. Always provide information on the bill title, number and general provisions when communicating with a congressional office.

**Number 6: No, I do not have an appointment, but I promise I will only take a half hour of your time.**

If you were not able to get an appointment, it is acceptable to stop by, drop off some materials and let them know of your interest in the issue. It is inappropriate to camp out in their doorway and demand that someone talk to you.

**Number 5: No, I do not really need anything specific.**

If you do not ask for something—a bill cosponsorship, a congressional record statement, or a meeting in the district, for example—some staff will wonder why you came by. Updates on your issue are fine, so long as they are accompanied by a request.

**Number 4: We have ten (or more) people in our group.**

Congressional offices are tiny. If you have more than five people in your group, you will be standing out in the hallway. Plus, having so many people talking at once can dilute the impact of your message. Try to limit your group to no more than five. If your group is large, assign a few people (specifically constituents) the responsibility of delivering the message.

**Number 3: What you are telling me cannot be right. I have heard/read otherwise.**

Most staff, or members for that matter, will not lie to you. They know that lying will get them in trouble. Sometimes they may see things differently than you do, but if they say that a bill is definitely not going to be considered on the floor, or that there is no such legislation, you should believe them.

**Number 2: What do you mean we have to stand in the hall?**

See number 4. A request to meet in the hallway is simply an indication of space limitations.

**Number 1: No, I do not represent anyone from your district or committee interest. I just thought you would be interested in what I have to say.**

Members are elected to represent *their* constituents. If you are not their constituents or you are not connected to their constituents, you are not relevant to them. Some members do rise to higher positions, but that just means they represent the interest of other members, not the entire nation. Your time is always best spent working with your own elected official and turning them into an advocate for your cause.

## FOLLOWING UP

### **Follow-up is critical**

Because you will likely have very limited time in any meeting with an official or their staff, it simply will not be possible to relay everything you want them to know in that very short period of time. Plus, they will likely have questions about the issues you raise that you will need to answer. Most advocates do not follow up on these meetings, and then wonder why their representatives do not do what they were asked to do. This usually happens for one of three reasons:

- The elected official simply forgot—with dozens of requests a day, this happens often
- The elected official has not had time to form an opinion on your question
- The elected official is waiting to see how much you really want what you are asking for

All three of these situations can be resolved with effective follow-up. You can remind them about your request, gently prod them to make a decision, and demonstrate your commitment to the cause!

### **Be diplomatic in reporting on your experience**

Unless you are treated incredibly rudely, do not bad-mouth the people you met with. It will inevitably get back to them, and they will not want to meet with you or work together in the future.

### **Be patient and considerate**

Even if you had a fabulous meeting, you should not expect an immediate response to your comments or concerns. Instead, make sure that you follow up with a thank you note or email to the staff person who met with you once you have asked what method of communication they prefer.

### **Keep in touch**

To keep the momentum rolling after your meeting, follow up by sending small communications throughout the year. If your organization was written up in a newspaper or magazine, send a copy of

the article, and do not forget to add the staff member to your newsletter or e-zine mailing list. It is also appropriate to drop a line when you have experienced changes in leadership or staff.

Of course, there is a difference between making relevant contact every few months and calling often just to chat. While it is important to stay on their radar screen, it is imperative not to be a pest. Keep your communications short and purposeful and you will be looked at as a resource, not a nuisance.

### **Become an ongoing resource**

Because congressional staff are usually not experts on all issues, they often turn to trusted outside experts when legislation that impacts their constituents is on the table. Let staff know if you have done research on specific subjects. Knowing that someone in the district really understands an issue can be very helpful, as they will know who to call for details they need to make informed decisions.