

HOW TO TALK SO CONGRESS LISTENS

Written by

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*If you would like an up-to-date listing of
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WHY DO I WANT TO TALK TO CONGRESS . . . AND WHY WOULD THEY LISTEN?

You Aren't Afraid to Say What You Think

Most of us are more than willing to say what we think our elected officials should or should not be doing. However, *few of us have confidence in our ability to actually influence their actions*. In short, we do not think our voice counts. While government is composed of human beings and thus may not always act rationally, our elected officials *do* respond to public sentiment. Unfortunately, it is easier for us to believe the contrary since that absolves us of the responsibility to make our voices heard.

You Have the Power (or Talk is Cheap)

Each of us not only has the *right*, but the *responsibility*, to let our elected officials know how we feel about issues that are important to us. Because you can offer personal experiences as well as a unique perspective on important issues affecting you, your community, or your business, *you are an invaluable source of information for Members of Congress*. What's more, you are a voice at the ballot box, and that's a quality that all elected officials value highly.

You May Think Congress Won't Listen To You Because:

Congress is in the Hands of the Special Interests

If you think that's the case, it's probably because you don't agree with what Congress is doing. Everything you're for is in the "public interest"; everything you're against is being pushed by some "special interest." The legislative process reflects a *community of interests*, each with its own perspective and priorities. It affords all citizens an opportunity to contribute at each and every step of the way. That contribution can come in many ways, each of which amounts to some form of persuasion or advocacy. The right to petition our government for redress of grievances is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This basic human right has been a hallmark of the American representative form of government. It is so pervasive and well-practiced that it has been given its own name: Lobbying.

Lobbying is Just for Special Interests

Despite what you may have heard, lobbying is an honorable and respectable profession. Public laws ranging from medical research and consumer safety to environmental protection and national defense have been passed with the help of lobbyists. If you belong to a professional association or civic group, *odds are that you have a lobbyist working for you*, informing your

organization of key upcoming legislation, votes, and other developments. When you call your elected officials to tell them about how you feel about a particular issue, *you are lobbying*. It happens all the time. It is perfectly legal, moral, ethical, and the right thing to do.

It's Politics; They Never Listen to People Like Me

If elected officials don't listen to their constituents, they are defeated on Election Day. This short manual seeks to equip you, the average citizen, with the basic tools to ensure that *when you talk, your elected officials in Washington listen*. You should expect nothing less. They are *your* representatives, after all.

If You Don't Speak Up, *Someone Else Will!*

PREPARATION FOR YOUR DIALOGUE WITH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

While every citizen can talk to Congress, some voices are heard better than others. Effective lobbying requires preparation. If you do not do your homework, you run the risk of never saying the right thing to the right person at the right time. Or even worse, without preparation, you might say the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time.

Information is the Key

Reliable, useful, well-presented information is the most important key to getting your voice heard in Washington. Know enough about an issue and/or legislation to be able to be accurate and to answer questions about what the bill will and will not do, who it will benefit and/or harm, and why a particular Member of Congress should support or oppose it. If the Member does not know any of these items, and you can pass on the information to him or her, then you have already been helpful. And that's another key to lobbying: finding ways to help a Member of Congress.

Here is a short **Checklist of Items** to keep in mind when preparing for any lobbying effort.

- √ ***Understand the issue and/or legislation.*** Although it has already been mentioned, its importance cannot be underscored. **Knowledge is power**, and nowhere is that axiom truer than in lobbying. You can get information on your issue and its status by going to <http://thomas.loc.gov>.
- √ ***Find out which groups are supporting and opposing the issue and/or legislation.*** Your opponents are your enemy. The more you know about them and their arguments, the better you can counter their efforts. Conversely, working with your allies only increases the chances of your success.
- √ ***Know who the key Congressional players are.*** Which committee has jurisdiction over the legislation, and who is the chairman of that committee? These Members will have the most influence over the legislation. Knowing who the sponsors and cosponsors of the legislation are is also important. You can obtain information on Members of Congress and the membership of congressional committees by going to <http://www.senate.gov> and <http://www.house.gov>.
- √ ***Make an organizational commitment to lobby.*** Within your larger group or organization, define your objectives, discuss the possible ramifications of your effort, and allocate the human and financial resources that will be necessary to meet that commitment.

√ ***Develop an action plan.*** A few visits to Congressional offices on a single issue will not require much planning. However, sustained lobbying on a number of bills calls for a strategic plan of action. This should include all the information described above coupled with the strategy for your lobbying effort and the tactics you intend to employ to implement that strategy. Proper materials need to be created for office visits, including background material, press releases, and letters from organizations supporting your view. This lobbying “kit” should be distributed to Members when you visit their offices, as well as to any local press and allies (other organizations) you may have. When preparing materials, show how the issue affects your organization, your community, your business, and provide concrete examples in support of these claims.

MEETING WITH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

The best way to lobby is in person. A face, a smile, a handshake leave an impression that is easier to recall than a disembodied voice on the phone or a voiceless, faceless letter or e-mail.

Take the Time to Come to Washington

It's common for people come to Washington to visit with their Members of Congress and their staff aides. Remember to make appointments in advance and confirm them just prior to the scheduled meeting. (Members' and their aides' schedules often change at the last moment.)

In the alternative, you can visit the Member or a staff aide in the Member's district office. Most Representatives and many Senators return to their districts or states every weekend or every-other weekend. You can make an appointment to see them in their offices. Or find out from their offices where they will be speaking or what events they plan to attend and get one or a few of your organization's members to speak to them at that time. However, meeting with them in Washington, DC is far more effective. Members of Congress appreciate the fact that you have taken the time and expense to come to Washington. *It shows the issue is important to you!*

Make it a Good Meeting

Here's a Checklist of Tips for Effective Meetings with Elected Officials

- √ ***Never overwhelm them with large groups of people.*** That only serves to threaten the Member and/or staff and may bog down the discussion while everyone tries to say something. Keep your group to five or six at the most, and plan ahead what each person is to say. If one of the participants actually knows the Member, then he or she should be the main speaker.
- √ ***Understand with whom you will be speaking.*** Even if you only speak with the staff aide of a Member, make sure you know the general background of the Member and whether they have a position on your subject of interest. There is nothing worse than being completely unprepared when speaking with a staff aide or the Member. Meeting or speaking with someone and trying to garner support for an issue and/or legislation and then being informed that the Member is already a supporter of the legislation is an uncomfortable situation at best. Also, do not refer to the "Congressman" when the Member is in fact female.
- √ ***Have a one-page information sheet ready.*** Have this ready at the beginning of the meeting to hand to the Member or staff aide. This tactic will allow them to refresh their memory, particularly if the topic is not one they usually handle or are familiar with. Keep the material simple and to the point, making clear the issue, your position, and what you want the Member to do. Assume you have no more than 15 minutes of the Member's time and even less of his or her attention. Get to the point, and don't waste time.

- √ ***Be persistent, but polite***, in trying to get the Member's view on an issue. If the Member doesn't agree with you, don't become overly argumentative. Find out the reasons for the disagreement. If you can't overcome them, try to make sure the Member won't be outspoken or lead the fight against you. Also, be aware of the politics of the issue. Members who want to support your position may have a reason for giving you only moral support, without a firm commitment. It may be a situation where they are reluctant to buck their committee chair or another Member of Congress. Know this in advance and be prepared to tell them why you are asking them to go out on a limb. In the alternative, show them a way to support you without having to go out on a limb.

- √ ***Always be sure to follow up on a meeting***, especially if the Member did not give you a firm commitment. Contact the staff member who handles the issue for the Member. You may have already met him or her at the meeting; this is a good time to develop a relationship with the staffer. Checking in once every two weeks or so is a good way to solidify contacts in the Member's office without bothering them too much.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

If you cannot meet with your Member in person, the next best alternative is to write them a letter, call their office, write an e-mail*, or send a fax. However, be forewarned: ***None of these methods will have the same impact as a personal visit unless your communication is part of a sustained effort by a group of people.*** Every Member of Congress gets thousands of communications each week. Typically, most of these are never seen by the Member. Instead, they are read by a staff aide who prepares a response, usually a form letter mailed to all constituents who have written in on a particular subject.

Does this mean that writing letters is a worthless effort? *Absolutely not!* Every letter and e-mail written to a Member of Congress counts. Some Members read a sampling of every week's mail. Your letter may be among that sample. And just about every Member of Congress receives a count of how many letters he or she has received on various subjects each week. Remember: Your letter, when combined with letters with others with the same viewpoint, can influence your elected official to act.

That's what makes writing a good email or letter so important. Regardless of the issue, ***here are the basic commandments*** that all communications to Members of Congress should follow.

- √ ***Good does not mean long.*** Long, rambling messages are ineffective. State your point near the beginning of the letter. Make the lead sentence of each paragraph the beginning of another point or sub-point. Try to keep the letter to one or two pages.
- √ ***Two (or more) is better than one.*** Because Congressional offices receive so much mail every week, a single letter may not get the proper attention it deserves, no matter how well written. Get other members of your organization to write (as many as you can). The caveat here is make sure that the letters are not identical. Congressional staffers are used to seeing the same letter printed over and over with a different signature. Write several different paragraphs that can be "mixed and matched" so each letter will be different.
- √ ***If you know the Member or staff aide,*** say so at the start of the letter. That may alert the aide opening the mail to give the letter special attention.
- √ ***Be both specific and practical.*** Relate the points of your letter to the Member's committee assignments and/or constituents' interests.
- √ ***Ask for a response*** that states the Member's position on the issue. Be sure to include your name and address so the Member can write a response.

√ *The substance of the response you receive is less important than the simple fact that you receive a response.* Take satisfaction in the response as a “return receipt.” If you want suggestions on how to follow-up, contact [Marlowe & Company](#).

** - See the following section for special information on Writing Effective E-mails*

CONTACTING YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS via EMAIL and the INTERNET

The way in which Congressional offices handle electronic communications has changed significantly in recent years. *Electronic communications allow Members of Congress to keep better track of constituent comments than had been previously possible with traditional letters or phone calls.* One way in which Members do this, however, is to restrict ways in which constituents may send them electronic communications.

For instance, most Members of Congress have set up a web page where only their constituents can send them a message via what is called a web form, rather than use a typical e-mail address. This allows the Members to receive only comments from those they represent. Also, it only allows original comments, not form messages, to get past the filters of the web program.

That being said, here are some special rules that pertain to electronically contacting your Member of Congress:

- √ *Electronically Contacting Your Member Counts!* An electronic communication is potentially more effective than a letter or phone call because it allows the Member to keep better track of your comment. Go to <http://www.capwiz.com/mandcmp> to send an electronic comment to your Member. You can use your zip code to find out who your elected officials are and how to contact them electronically. Then, you can send your own message without leaving that website.
- √ *Do not attempt to send electronic communications to Members of Congress who represent other Districts or States.* They don't get read or answered.
- √ *Don't expect more than an "auto-responder" reply to your electronic communication.* Most Members continue to reply by postal mail to all constituent comments, whether electronic or not. It won't be the informative, responsive letter you expected. *Just remember that every communication does count.*

OTHER METHODS OF LOBBYING

In addition to visiting and speaking with a Member of Congress and his or her staff on an issue, there are several other activities that you can use to assist you in your lobbying efforts. Two of the most important are:

Knowing and Using the Congressional Process to Your Advantage

The most obvious way to use the congressional process to your advantage is to *persuade a Member to introduce a bill on you or your organization's behalf*. In addition to helping them draft legislation, you can further your cause by rounding up cosponsors for the legislation, which can increase the support for, and awareness of, your issue. Getting a subcommittee or committee to hold a hearing on particular legislation or issue you support is another important method of attracting attention to it.

Members of Congress who support your view can also make statements on the House or Senate floor in favor of your position that will be printed in the Congressional Record. If articles or other materials appear in support of your position, those same Members can have them reprinted in the Congressional Record. *You can then get copies of materials printed in the Congressional Record for distribution to your organization, the press, or other Members of Congress*. All of these methods will greatly assist in your lobbying initiative. The more you know about the process, the more options you have. The text of the Congressional Record is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov>.

Coalition Building

Look for allies who will join your lobbying effort, even when you have to look in the most unlikely places. Organizations that do not cooperate with each other under most circumstances can be pulled together to work on a single issue where they find common purpose. *The broader your base of support, the more likely Congress will listen.*

Some coalitions take on a *formal* structure. They adopt a name and a method of funding, together with periodic meetings to develop and implement a lobbying strategy on one or more issues. Others are more *ad hoc*. They may have a name and hold meetings, but they limit themselves to one issue and often have no formal funding mechanism. There are also *sub-rosa* coalitions where groups which are normally political enemies reach out to each other in an intentionally unpublicized effort to achieve a common goal.

At the national level, coalitions are used with ever-increasing frequency and effectiveness in the legislative process. It takes time and effort to put one together (and to keep it together), but coalitions often make good legislative sense.

*To help your group get its voice heard in Washington,
contact:*

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