

YOUR LAWMAKERS DO HEAR YOU

If you write a letter to your Representative or Senator, does it do any good? Yes, says a study published by the American University's Institute for Government Public Information Research.

According to the study, Congressional Representatives and Senators consider constituent mail and telephone calls to be "the most important kind of communication in developing positions on issues and legislation."

KEY PRESSURE POINTS IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

As a bill progresses through the House and Senate there are certain times when your action can have the greatest influence on the final result of the legislative proposal. These key pressure points on both sides of the Legislature are:

- With the individual, group or agency who originates the idea for a bill.
- With the legislator who introduces the bill.
- With members of the committee.
- With the full House and Senate.
- With the Governor.

Generally, the Sierra Club will alert you to as to when your contact will have the greatest effect.

Ten Commandments of Lobbying

1. **Do Your Homework:** Learn as much as you can about the problem. Be able to explain how it affects you. Know the strengths and weaknesses of your opponents' arguments. Anticipate questions, and have the answers ready.
2. **Start Early:** You have to be ready when the time comes and everything always takes longer than you think it will.
3. **Tell the Truth:** Legislators rely on you for good information. You will never regain your credibility once you lose it. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. If you promise to find an answer, do it.
4. **Keep It Simple:** Work from the KISS principle – Keep It Short and Simple. Think about what you want and why you want it. Legislators are busy people and appreciate a concise summary of what you want.
5. **Take Your Friends Where You Find Them:** Find your friends and work with them. In politics, a friend is someone who helps you when you need help, whether a Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative. Never cut anyone off from contact; your opponent today may be your ally tomorrow.
6. **Know Your Opponents:** Do not waste time trying to convince those who are publicly committed to their position. Put your energy into swaying undecided votes. However, keep lines of communication with your opponents open for possible compromises.
7. **Think Big, But Always Know Your Bottom Line:** Always ask for more than you think you can get. The legislative process is one of compromise – legislators try to give everyone something. Have something you can give to your opponents without hurting you. This means you must prioritize. Decide what is most important and be willing to compromise on everything else.
8. **Build Coalitions:** Work from a united front. Find groups and individuals who agree with you on an issue and work with them. Do not expect them to agree with you on every issue or expect the coalition to last forever. It does not matter who gets the credit as long as it gets done. Grabbing credit is divisive and gives your opponents something to exploit. Keep your problems to yourselves.
9. **Work at the Local Level:** Legislators pay most attention to their constituents. Sometimes you can affect the key decision-makers directly, but more often it is best done through local contacts with legislators, media and allies.

10. Thank People Who Help: Everybody appreciates a pat on the back!

How to Lobby YOUR Senator or Representative

Prior To Your Appointment:

- Make an appointment; explain to the secretary what you want to talk about and who will attend the meeting. Let him or her know how long you would like to talk to the legislator.
- Learn something about the legislator, such as political party, district, religion, occupation, leadership positions, and legislative committee assignments.
- Have an extra copy of the bill you will be speaking with the legislator about.
- Be on time, but do not be surprised if the legislator is not, especially during a session.

The Meeting:

- Introduce yourself and anyone with you.
- Address the legislator as "Senator" or "Representative."
- Be specific; stick to one bill or subject, mentioning the specific bill number; offer the legislator a copy of the bill and brief background material.
- Explain why you support or oppose the bill and why the legislator should do the same.
- Be persistent, but do not be angry or belligerent, and do not expect the legislator to be so. Make sure you understand the pros and cons of the bill; if possible, use examples, personalizing it to your own experience.
- Answer questions. Expect the legislator to ask some; if you do not have the answer, say so and offer to find the answer and provide it to the legislator later.
- If the legislator shares something in confidence, do not repeat it.
- Only take the time you were allotted.
- Focus conversation on the common ground between your position and the legislator's. Play to your strengths.
- Leave any materials you have, they should be brief.
- Be courteous throughout.
- Thank the legislator and his/her secretary or aide.

After The Meeting:

- Write a report on your visit to your organization's Lobbyist or Director.
- Follow-up with a letter to the legislator outlining the major points covered. Thank him/her again and enclose any information promised or requested.

General Comments:

- Legislators have differing skills, interests and education. Each session they deal with hundreds of widely varying issues. Therefore, a legislator may not be personally knowledgeable about your specific bill or issue. That is why your contact is important. They need it!
- Legislators generally are receptive to their constituents and other visitors; they appreciate the information you have to offer.
- Your credibility establishes your relationship with a legislator. Make sure everything you present to the legislator is truthful and accurate.
- Provide information and persuade the legislator to vote favorably on your bill or issue. Do not make judgments or give your opinions on other matters.
- You may not be an expert on your issue. However, compared to the legislator, who has to deal with all those issues, you are a wealth of knowledge.

- Your visit may provide the legislator with the reason to vote favorably on a bill. Every visit has an impact. Since most people never visit, write or call their legislator, the legislator realizes that your time represents the interests of many absent constituents.

How to Call YOUR Senator or Representative

When the legislature is in session, you can call your legislator at their Capitol office (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday). On other days of the week (Saturday through Monday) and during session holidays, you may need to ask a staffer at their Capitol office to have the lawmaker call you.

Here are some tips for making telephone calls to your legislators:

- Identify yourself by name and address.
- Identify the bill you want to talk about by issue and number.
- Briefly state what your position is and how you would like your legislator to vote. Make it as succinct as possible, and show how it would effect you or the legislator's district.
- Ask for your legislator's view on the bill or issue; ask for a commitment to vote for your position. Do not argue. If the legislator takes a position opposite to yours, respect it.
- Offer to answer questions or supply any additional information. Send your information quickly, as the legislature moves rapidly during a session.
- Do not be abusive or do not threaten.
- If the legislature is in session, your call may have to be taken by a secretary or aide to the legislator. Give them the same information you would the legislator. Legislator's staff are very reliable and will relay your information to the legislator. Do not be surprised if the legislator calls you back later.
- Follow up the call with a note thanking the legislator (or staff) for their time. Use the note as an opportunity to briefly restate your position.

When the legislature is in session, you can call their capitol office and ask if you can be transferred to your Rep or Senator on the session floor.

How to Write to YOUR Senator or Representative

Letters are important, even critical, to influence legislation. Persuasive letters are effective, efficient, and timely. Here are some guidelines to follow in writing an effective letter:

- Be specific; stick to one bill or subject, mention the specific bill number, if possible.
- Explain why you support or oppose the bill and why the legislator should do the same. Show you know the pros and cons.
- Write in your own words and include thoughts of your own. Personal experience is the best evidence. Use examples.
- Be knowledgeable. Do not send a postcard or form letter. Handwritten letters are fine if legible.
- No apologies, for taking the legislator's time. Do not affect a "righteous" tone, as in--"As a citizen and taxpayer...."
- Be brief. One page, well-written, is better than two or more.
- Mention if you live in the legislator's district. They like to be responsive to their own constituents.
- Do not try to become the legislator's "pen pal". Pen pal's can become nuisances.
- Write as an individual, concerned citizen. You are not part of a letter-writing campaign.

- If you ask a legislator a question and do not receive a reply, follow up with another letter asking for a response. Credibility of letters is enhanced if a follow-up letter is sent when a first letter goes unacknowledged.
- When a legislator votes as you asked, send a Thank You. Legislators like thank-you's just as you do, and receive very few of them.

The Capitol address for Representatives is:

The Honorable (full name)
State Representative
State Capitol
PO Box 30014, Lansing, MI 48909-7514

The Honorable (full name)
State Senator
State Capitol
PO Box 30036, Lansing, MI 48909-7536