

Congressional Communications

Members of Congress care passionately about what their constituents (aka voters) care passionately about. It is no surprise, therefore, that every Member spends a lot of time, attention, and staff / office resources encouraging, receiving, processing, and responding to constituent communications. This Best Practices Guide discusses how to communicate effectively with Congress in an era when congressional communications channels are operating at or beyond capacity.

Senators and representatives maintain an office in Washington, D.C., and one or more offices in their state or district. With the exception of casework inquiries (see: *Congressional Offices and Staff*), all other congressional communications should be directed to the Washington office and, for that reason, this Guide focuses primarily on D.C. communications. The recommendations that follow are based upon Cornerstone's 250+ years of combined Hill experience and recent opinion research surveys:

- **Face-to-Face Meetings.** A Congressional Management Foundation study confirms our experience that personal meetings are the most effective way to communicate with a Member of Congress. Such meetings are arranged by following the procedures that each office has established. (Usually this involves sending a written request to the scheduler or filling in an online form.) Given its importance, we have created a dedicated Best Practices Guide to this communications technique: *Face-to-Face Meetings*.
- **Email.** Members and staff have a strong preference for email (especially for follow-up communications). However, like everyone else, they suffer from email overload and thus treat their email addresses like unlisted phone numbers. It is imperative, therefore, that you obtain those addresses whenever possible, but not abuse that knowledge by sharing/republishing it or sending more than a reasonable amount of email.
- **Telephone.** Congressional offices have one published phone number and one or two receptionists. Calls to Members and staff must be placed through the main number even if you have an individual's direct landline or cell phone number. (There are exceptions, of course, such as when they've explicitly instructed you to call their direct line.) Always respond to messages through the medium in which they were sent (if you get a call, respond with a call)



and with respect to phone calls, follow these guidelines: (1) identify yourself; (2) get straight to the point; (3) be patient and polite; and (4) always say thank you.

- **Postal Mail.** In September and October 2001, letters containing anthrax bacteria were mailed to several news media offices and two U.S. senators, killing five people. As a result, mail to congressional offices is “decontaminated”—a process that not only delays delivery but can melt pages together (all but destroying the paper). Because regular mail delivery to House and Senate offices in D.C. now takes weeks instead of days, this communications channel is essentially useless. (If you must send a hard copy to a congressional office, deliver it personally to the in-state or Washington office or fax it in.
- **Fax.** Since the anthrax attacks, the only practical way to ensure timely delivery of hardcopy has been by fax. Unfortunately, legitimate faxes get buried among the hundreds generated by blast fax campaigns (which continue unabated despite their total ineffectiveness). So, if you must send a fax, call or email the appropriate staffer to let them know that it was transmitted.

THE RESEARCH DOESN'T LIE

The Congressional Management Foundation (a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Congress become a more productive and effective institution through better management) has been studying the flow of communications to and from Capitol Hill for more than a decade.

Personal messages count a lot; form communications don't. In situations where a representative or senator has not reached a firm decision on an issue, 97% of the respondents to the CMF survey said an in-person visit would have “some” or “a lot” of influence, and 88% said an indi-

individualized postal letter or email would as well. However, only 1% said that identical form letters, or email matter “a lot” and zero said that form faxes count “a lot.”

- 1) **The Internet makes it easier (but not better).** Some 87% of respondents in a 2011 CMF survey said the Internet and email have made it easier for citizens to participate in the public-policy process and 57% note that these tools have made Members of Congress more responsive to their constituents. However, 65% say that the Internet has reduced the quality of constituent communications overall.
- 2) **Congressional offices face an increased communications workload.** Anecdotal data collected by CMF suggests that congressional offices have seen a 200% to 1,000% increase in constituent communications in the past decade even though personal office staff levels have not increased. (The total number of personal staff allotted to each representative was set by law in 1979 and Senate office sizes also have remained relatively unchanged in the past three decades.)
- 3) **Personal messages count a lot; form communications don’t.** In situations where a representative or senator has not reached a firm decision on an issue, 97% of the respondents to the CMF survey said an in-person visit would have “some” or “a lot” of influence, and 88% said an individualized postal letter or email would as well. However, only 1% said that identical form letters, or email matter “a lot” and zero said that form faxes count “a lot.”
- 4) **Staff doubt the legitimacy of identical form messages.** In fact, when asked whether they thought identical form communications were generated without “the knowledge or consent” of the constituent, 53% agreed or strongly agreed. (This is an astounding observation and one reason why *Strong Stalks Networks* are recommended.)

MAKING THE BEST OF IT

Based upon the CMF research, our experience, and feedback from current and former congressional staff, these appear to be current best practices when it comes to communicating with Congress:

- **Constituents rule.** Whenever possible, an organization’s messages should be delivered by individual constituents. Face-to-face meetings with the Member of Congress are preferred over every other technique for initial contact. Email and telephone calls are the best way to follow up and they should always refer to the initial face-to-face

meeting.

- **Quality trumps quantity.** Flooding the Hill with cards or letters is a practice that dates back many decades. However, as one correspondence staffer stated: “Form [messages] are a waste of everyone’s time. What we care about is that a constituent not only took the time to write... but that he or she understands the fundamentals of the issue at hand and makes a rational, well-conceived argument for the position.”
- **Identify yourself.** One of the most fascinating findings from the CMF research is that organizations employing mass-communication techniques seldom identify themselves.
- **Do your homework.** CMF also found that many organizations communicating with congressional offices have little understanding of Congress in general and the legislative process and its cycles in particular.

Organizations stirring up their members and stakeholders on an issue need to take great pains — congressional staffers say — to ensure that all correspondence conforms to five guidelines:

1. **Constituents Only.** Asking your network to contact all 100 senators will (for example) result in two communications that are read (maybe) and 98 that are not. Thus, you must ensure that everyone only contacts their representative and/or two senators. (Most online congressional “Contact Me” forms automatically reject messages from non-constituents.)
2. **Timely Action.** Asking a Member of Congress to support a bill that hasn’t yet been introduced or to vote for a measure that passed weeks ago are two examples of asks that make the asking organization look foolish. For this reason, always make sure that your messages are crafted in a way that asks a Member to take timely action.
3. **Aim for the Fence-Sitters.** Representatives or senators who have already taken a position on an issue — such as by cosponsoring a bill — do not need to be bombarded with correspondence. Do your homework and spend your precious resources on the undecideds.
4. **Forget Faxes and Snail Mail.** Form emails (submitted through the Member’s online contact page) consume significantly less staff resources than faxes and snail mail. So, if you have no other recourse but mass communications, use the online email channel.
5. **Don’t Take the Bait.** Due to light-speed communications and the ubiquitous nature of the Internet, in-

dividuals today are bombarded with an overwhelming volume of “facts” about Congress, the President, and public policy issues. Thus, you should always take the time to verify your information before firing-up the old laptop to dash off an angry missive. If you don’t, you run the risk of losing the conversation before it gets started and damaging both your causes and your credibility.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Communicating effectively with Members of Congress resembles nothing so much as a Kabuki dance and, when done correctly, can produce beautiful results. According to the CMF, “Whether individuals make contact face-to-face, by phone, or through personalized email or postal mail, senators and representatives are influenced by their constituents’ own views about public policy issues.” We hope that this Best Practices Guide has provided you with some insight so that the next time you find yourself typing out an email to your representative or senator you’ll perform like a samurai!