

# Publicity, Politics, and Events

*This Best Practices Guide explains how—as part of a comprehensive congressional communications strategy — organizations can get closer to senators and representatives by helping them generate publicity, meet their constituents, and raise campaign funds.*

## GENERATE PUBLICITY

Everyone loves to see their name in print and Members of Congress are no exception. In fact, publicity is so important to them that representatives have at least one full-time communicator on staff and senators generally have several. Helping congressional communicators do their job will bring you closer to the Member and that, in turn, will further your legislative agenda. Here are some specific suggestions:

- **Project Announcements.** Until recently (F.Y. 2010), universities sought, and Members of Congress helped them obtain, funding for individual projects. The process of “earmarking” funds within appropriations bills has been (at least temporarily and possibly permanently) put on hold as Congress attempts to rein-in the federal budget deficit. With the earmark moratorium in place, universities have focused more on programmatic funding requests. In this changed climate, there is nothing wrong with giving Members some thanks and credit for programmatic successes, including those that result in project awards. This could be done by letting them make the project announcements or mentioning their support for the underlying program in the university’s release. It never hurts to ask if they’d like a shout out! (But understand that some Members, especially newly-elected conservatives, are just not interested in bringing home the bacon and may very well say no. But, don’t let that dissuade you from asking... you might be surprised.)
- **Letters to the Editor.** It is surprising — given the information explosion of recent years — how fascinated Members continue to be with the Letters to the Editor section of their local papers. They look to these letters both as a gauge of public interest in various topics and to see how their positions are playing back home. A 2011 survey by the Congressional Management Foundation



(CMF) underscores the anecdotal evidence; when asked to evaluate the effectiveness of local media (including letters to the editor), 80% of the respondents (congressional staff) said that this channel was “very important” and the remaining 20% said it was “somewhat important.”

- **Op-Eds.** While some may argue (persuasively in our view) that long-form prose isn’t nearly as effective as it was a generation ago, great benefits can still accrue from working with a congressional office to write and place a several hundred-word opinion-piece for print and/or online publication. Yes, op-ed articles are time consuming to research and write, but they’re still a golden opportunity to show a representative or senator that your institution is interested in helping them gain publicity on a subject of mutual interest.
- **Social Media.** Members of Congress are, according to the CMF study, showing increasing interest in using social media to gauge public opinion and share information with constituents. Findings from the CMF study are worth mentioning: (1) 84% said Members of Congress have become more inclined to use social media while only 1% said their bosses had become less inclined to use it. (2) 76% of the respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “social media enabled us to have more meaningful interactions with constituents,” and nearly as many (70%) agreed that “social media have made Members/Senators more accountable to constituents.” To quote the CMF report: “Despite overwhelming cynicism as to whether Congress listens to citizens, these findings support previous CMF research indicating that

constituents can have an impact on lawmakers' decisions.”

## SPONSOR EVENTS

Members of Congress love constituents a lot and groups of constituents a whole lot. Events are, therefore, a very useful communications tool because they help Members connect directly with a cluster of voters. However, if the news media is also present then you've got the potential to score two runs from a single hit. The following list (which is not meant to be exhaustive) provides some possible suggestions of university-related events that might also generate favorable publicity for a Member of Congress:

- **Science Breakthroughs.** Research discoveries, either fundamental or applied, are celebrated too infrequently. Look for a few occasions each year when your most notable discoveries are to be made public and create an event around each announcement. Bring the science team, their colleagues, students, staff, and stakeholders together to discuss the discovery and its significance. Invite a Member to stand with you at the podium as the announcement is made.
- **Facility Dedications.** Politicians absolutely love ribbon cutting ceremonies. Whenever possible, invite them to attend and make brief remarks and, if they do come, make sure they are at the center of attention. Invite the press and work with the Member's office on a press release. Also, have a photographer present and get the best photos into their hands as quickly as possible. (Many representatives and senators have a dedicated photo library on their official website.) Include statements from them in the university's news release.
- **Conferences and Seminars.** If there is a particular subject (e.g. water) that is critically important to your state and university, consider building a public policy event to discuss it and ask a key member of your congressional delegation to give the kick-off address. Offer to help them prepare their remarks and invite them to stay for the remainder of the event. Even if they only drop by at the beginning, they will be thankful that you have helped them connect with constituents and garner favorable publicity.
- **Field Trips, Site Visits, and Private Tours.** Many university facilities are open to interested stakeholders and the public at large on one or more days a year. Make

sure that Members, their state/district managers, and the relevant legislative and communications staff are aware of and invited to such open houses or field trips. And, if they come, treat them like VIPs (be mindful of the House and Senate ethics rules) and make sure they are introduced to their constituents and any media that may be in attendance. It also is desirable to invite them on private tours when the public is not present. The bottom line here? *Get them on campus!*

- **Town Hall Meetings.** In recent decades, both senators and representatives have increased the frequency of “town hall” and other public forums where they appear and answer questions from constituents. Members are always looking for good venues to hold such events and you may have facilities that meet those needs. If so, offer them up, and make sure that a high-ranking university official is there to give the welcoming remarks.

## MAKE POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

An unfortunate fact of life in modern America is that electoral campaigns are expensive and candidates for federal office must, therefore, spend a lot of time raising money. If there is an upside to this situation, it is that senators and representatives hold/attend a lot of political events (fundraisers) and for the price of admission, it is usually possible to get some one-on-one time with them. While it is never a good idea to overtly lobby a Member at a fundraiser, a general conversation about a matter of mutual interest can often be just as effective. If you like what an incumbent has been doing for your institution, then open up your wallet and attend their political events.