How to Build Relationships with Members of Congress and Why It’s Important

December 17, 2018
Seth Turner
Director of Citizen Engagement
“Do most Members of Congress care what their constituents think?”
(Rasmussen National Survey – 2016)

“How important the aspect is to your effectiveness as a Representative?”
(Congressional Management Foundation Survey of U.S. House of Representatives Members – 2011)
“Congress cares what constituents think.”
- Public Opinion

“Staying in touch with constituents.”
- Member of Congress Opinion
11% of Congress Appeared on “Meet the Press” in 2014
Agenda

- Part One: Communicating with Lawmakers
  - Life of Lawmakers
  - Communicating with Policymakers
  - Building Relationship with Lawmakers
  - Conducting Effective Meetings
  - What Congress Wants from Constituents

- Part Two: Storytelling
  - Interactive Exercise

- Testimonials from Congressional Staff
- Research
- Ask Questions
Average Percentage Increase in Constituent Mail

- **House**
- **Senate**
- **All Offices**

Baseline:
- 2002: 64%
- 2003: 78%
- 2004: 55%
- 2005: 92%
- 2006: 94%
- 2007: 169%
- 2008: 114%
- 2009: 202%
- 2010: 158%

Average Percentage Increase:
- 2002: 111%
- 2003: 396%
- 2004: 297%
- 2005: 308%
- 2006: 396%
- 2007: 585%
- 2008: 548%
- 2009: 865%
- 2010: 548%
House Congressional District Annual Constituent Mail

- 2001: 9,300
- 2011: 48,000
- 2017: 123,000
Communicating with Congress

What Works & What Doesn’t
Survey Question

If your Member/Senator has not already arrived at a firm decision on an issue, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the Washington office have on his/her decision?
A Lot of Positive Influence

- In-Person Issue Visits from Constituents: 54%
- Contact from Constituents' Reps: 46%
- Individualized Email Messages: 30%
- Visit From a Lobbyist: 8%
- Form Email Messages: 3%
Relationship Building with Lawmakers
Survey Question

“In thinking about constituents and the groups that represent them (e.g., associations, nonprofits, companies), what should they do more or less of to build better relationships with your office and your Member/Senator?”
Get to know the Legislative Assistant 79%
Get to know the District/State Director 62%
Get to know the Scheduler 25%
Get to know the Chief of Staff 23%

Should do more of
Advocacy Engagement Ladder

- Direct Interaction
- In-District Events
- Town Hall Meetings
- Letters to the Editor/Editorials
- Personalized Communication
- Form Communication
Conducting Effective Meetings

Before
Survey Question

“In your opinion, how prepared is the typical constituent you meet with?”
78% very prepared
12% somewhat prepared, but could be better
10% not prepared at all
“The lack of preparation for meetings is a real problem. It's disappointing when constituents and/or lobbyists come in for meetings and they are clueless about the Congressman, district and committee assignments.”

- House Chief of Staff
Do Your Homework
Relate Your Issues to Their Interests

Possible Connections

• Committee Jurisdiction
• Professional Background
• School
• Family
• Volunteer Positions
• Church Affiliation
Conducting Effective Meetings

During
Survey Question

When meeting with a group of constituents as part of an organized fly-in or lobby day, please indicate the helpfulness of the following written material.
Leave behind 1-2 page issue summary

94% Very/Somewhat Helpful
6% Not Very Helpful

Follow-up email with attachments of material

86% Very/Somewhat Helpful
14% Not Very Helpful

Leave behind 5 page or greater length research report

82% Very/Somewhat Helpful
18% Not Very Helpful
“PLEASE do not bring me glossy folders with tons of background information! It's going right in the recycle bin!”

- Congressional Staff
Tip!

Don’t think “leave-behind,”
think “read-ahead.”

- Citizen Centric Advocacy Report
What Members Want to Know

- What actions do constituents want me to take?
- Why do constituents want me to do that?
- What are the current and/or potential local impacts?
- What are constituents’ personal stories or connections to the policy?
Survey Question

“How helpful is it for messages from constituents to include the following?”

“How frequently is it for messages from constituents to include the following?”
Local Impact

- Total revenue
- Number of Customers or Employees
- Total Wages Paid
- Multiplier Effects
- Benefit to the Taxpayer
Survey Question

“How frequently do you experience the following in constituent meetings?”
One or more constituents was rude

- Didn't understand negative consequences: 95%
- Didn't have data on impact on district/state: 90%
- Didn't know Member's history on policy/issue: 87%
- Too many participants in the meeting: 85%
- Too many topics/talking points in their meeting: 84%
- Was unspecific with their request for action: 81%
- Didn't know the Member's relevant committee assignment(s): 78%
- Didn't convey personal story related to issue: 55%
- One or more constituents was rude: 23%
Conducting Effective Meetings

Follow Up
Survey Question

If you are not able to provide a firm answer to their request/ask, how EFFECTIVE are these follow-up activities?

If you are not able to provide a firm answer to their request/ask, how FREQUENTLY is follow up conducted by the following?
Email from constituents

- Very Frequent: 8%
- Very Effective: 39%

Phone call from constituents

- Very Frequent: 0%
- Very Effective: 22%
Meeting with Congress

Top 10 Tips
Meeting with Congress: Top 10 Tips

1. Be clear on the goal
2. Know your issue
3. Know who you’re talking to
4. Connect your issue to the Member's priorities
5. Keep it short
Meeting with Congress: Top 10 Tips

6. Deliver message in first 5 minutes
7. Never go off-message
8. The less paper, the better
9. Don’t dis’ the help
10. Follow-up ASAP.
Storytelling

How to Create Stories to Move the Hearts, Minds, and VOTES of Lawmakers
Elements of Advocacy Storytelling
BUT FIRST - Begin With the End in Mind

- If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there
- An advocate knows what the ask is
- A story teller lays the groundwork and knows what they want
- Consider various tactics and methods to achieve your goal in the story (flattery, surprise, restraint, emotion)
1. “The Opening”
Set the Stage & Establish the Stakes

- Your first sentence or two should be a hook to make them want to know more
- Establish context for the life you’ll describe
- What was at stake? (For the client, or the family or even you...)
2. “Paint the Picture”
The Details and the Senses

- What did you see, hear, touch, taste, smell?
- Remember the adjectives of the situation
- Make it real. Be practical, specific, and graphic – don’t hold ANYTHING back!
3. “The Struggle” – Describe the Fight

- Identify the conflict
- Struggles are mental, philosophical, emotional, physical – even internal
- Play the underdog – turn weakness into strength
4. “The Discovery”
Always Surprise the Legislator

- Wait until it has the most impact
- Balance the past and the present
- What did you learn?
- How did that learning impact your life and others like you now, and in the future?
5. “We Can Win!”
Introduce the Potential of Success & Joy

- Success – Our hero/heroin wins
- Comfort/Joy – Our audience participates

- Have your ending sentence clearly memorized and know when to use it
- Exercise restraint
Elements of Personal Narratives for Advocacy

- Begin with the end in mind
- Set the stage
- Paint the picture
- Describe the fight
- Include a surprise
- Introduce the potential success and joy
- Finish with a hook
CongressFoundation.org
sturner@CongressFoundation.org

THE PARTNERSHIP FOR
A More Perfect Union