

# Communicating with Legislators

There are a finite number of ways to communicate with legislators — each with advantages and disadvantages. Here are the most common forms of communication, ranked from most desirable to least. In each case, make sure your legislator knows you are a constituent. Constituents are their top priority and they enjoy hearing from the people they represent.

## 1. Personal visits with legislators in their districts

Personal visits are always preferred. Best carried out prior to legislative sessions, these meetings allow you to visit with your legislators in a relaxed setting and might include a visit by the legislator to your business or association. At these meetings, it is a good idea to present legislators with position papers covering your major concerns, including the results of research, surveys and other supporting information. Include your name as a contact for further information.

## 2. Legislative district meetings

Most legislators have regular public meetings with constituents in their districts. Local newspapers usually carry notices of times and locations of such meetings. They can be very effective opportunities for you. Arrive early (you may be alone with your legislators for a while) and bring copies of your position papers. Make your points, then move out of the way and let others talk.

## 3. Personal visits in St. Paul

Capitol visits with legislators can be very effective, but please realize the extreme time pressures your legislators are under. Call ahead for an appointment. Don't be shocked to find that legislators have had meetings added to their schedules and might be late. Be prepared for them to invite others to attend your meeting: staff members, other constituents or legislators, etc. Plan to make a two- to three-minute presentation supported by a detailed position paper, then respond to legislators' questions.

Many trade and professional associations sponsor Capitol visits. These events can be very effective opportunities for you to meet and communicate with key legislators. You should make every effort to attend such events and to support the organizations that are working for you.

## 4. Personal phone calls and faxes

The effectiveness of phone calls and faxes is in direct proportion to your legislators' familiarity with you and your issues. If you have done your homework in advance with personal meetings and position papers, your chances of success are greater than they will be if your legislators don't know you.

## 5. Mailed letters

Again, if your legislators know you and your issues, brief letters with position papers are effective. Even if they don't know you, they'll read your letter if you are a constituent. Generally, you are wasting time sending personal letters to other legislators unless you have a specific relationship with them or if they are on a committee that is dealing with one of your issues. Remember to include a detailed position paper.

## 6. E-mail letters

All legislators have the capability to receive e-mail messages, but e-mail ranks lower on the effectiveness scale simply because of the amount of spam and listserv mailings they receive. If you do send e-mail to your legislator, be sure to put your address in the subject line so they know immediately that you are a constituent.

## 7. Mailed postcards

Least effective is a bulk-mailed postcard. While this method can communicate your position on an issue, a pre-printed postcard will get less attention than other means of communication.

# Things legislators like — and don't like — to hear

When writing, calling, meeting with or testifying to legislators there are many “red flag” words and phrases that can help sell your case or lessen its chances. Your job in rounding up legislative support is very similar to that of a retail salesperson; if you remember that, the following statements will have obviously positive — or negative — effects.

Things legislators like to hear:

- We have done thorough research on the issue.
- There is either no opposition to this measure or:
  - the opposition is minimal (this must be true).
  - we have met with the opposition and have worked out this compromise approach.
- Our proposal will save the state “X” dollars over the next biennium.
- This bill is revenue-neutral; it won't involve a tax increase or a spending cut elsewhere.
- We have checked with the appropriate state department and they support this approach.
- This bill will create “X” new jobs in our state.
- This bill is supported by the following major organizations in your district. (Be careful to include groups which are seen as positive forces.)
- Similar measures have been created in several states, including states A, B and C (neighboring or similar states are best) with positive results.

Some things legislators don't like to hear:

- The industry (or the field, or profession, etc.) is divided on the issue. (Note: If this statement is true, legislators may hear about it from someone other than you.)
- One way you can pay for this measure is to cut spending.
- We don't know how much it will cost.
- Really about the only opposition we expect will come from the League of Women Voters, the local Chamber of Commerce, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and the Lutherans.

Ewald Consulting's mission is to help associations achieve outstanding outcomes while serving their members. Ewald Consulting has received charter accreditation as an Association Management Company from:

- International Association of Association Management Companies
- American Society of Association Executives

**Ewald  Consulting**

1000 Westgate Drive, Suite 252

St. Paul, MN 55414-1067

[www.ewald.com](http://www.ewald.com)