

Communicating with Elected Officials

There are several methods to communicate with elected officials; the most appropriate depends on time and the situation. Communications with elected officials can take place via e-mail, mail, telephone or face-to-face meetings. The method you choose is not nearly as important as your message.

Tips to assure your communication is effective and missteps to avoid are listed below. Elected officials care about views from members of their community or district. Communications are an effective tool to have an impact on legislation that affects your company/organization or you personally. Communications that hold the most weight are from their constituents.

Understand the legislative process

Your ability to communicate will be enhanced. There are many steps in the legislative process, whether it is at the local, state or federal level. Be sure you know when it is the best time to communicate your views and whether you will need to communicate more than once and to more than one elected official.

Be brief

Limit your message to one topic and clearly identify whether you support or oppose the issue. Make clear concise comments. Include relevant information only. If you know the bill (ordinance or resolution) number (agenda item or title), include it in your message. Be sure you have the correct number.

Know the issues

It is best to be familiar with the pros and cons of an issue. Be sure you understand which level of government has governance over your concern so you are communicating with the appropriate official(s).

Testifying before a legislative committee

When planning to testify, make sure you understand the rules and protocol. Keep your comments succinct and attempt not to repeat what has been said by another conferee. Remain calm and try to comment rather than read your statement. Rehearse your testimony. Make sure you have reserved a place on the list of those planning to testify. Be sure to bring the appropriate number of written statements for the committee, staff and possibly media. I recommended you consult with someone who has testified before a legislative committee to better understand the process and plan for all contingencies. Remember time is limited, there may be several conferees who are planning to speak.

Prepare for the visit

Organize your thoughts and comments. Rehearse your points and make sure you understand the issue completely. Do not try to dazzle them with loads of statistics, limit stats to just a couple to make your case. Do not lecture, convey your justification for your position and ask for their help and support. You may leave a written review with them, but keep it short.

Writing a letter

It is best to limit your message to one page. Be sure to use your business or personal letterhead if possible. Typed letters are the most legible, but if handwriting, make sure it is legible. Be sure to sign the letter and include all your contact information. Make sure you address the envelope correctly.

Emailing a message

Make sure your message is short and to the point. Legislators receive a high volume of e-mails; lengthy ones may not receive attention. Make sure your message clearly states how the legislation impacts you and/or your company; include the bill number and your contact information.

Phone call

Know what you are going to say before you call. It is helpful to make notes to assure you are topic. Do not expect to talk to the elected official; they spend a great deal of time in meetings or on the floor. (Most local elected officials will not be in the office when you call.) Your message will reach the elected official if you are brief and clearly state your views to the staff person.

Face-to-face

Be sure to make an appointment. They have many demands on their time; respect their time and keep your visit short and to the point (no more than 15 minutes during a legislative session). Let them know in advance what you would like to talk about. Be on time; however, be aware they may not arrive on time due to legislative demands.





Important Guidelines

when communicating with elected officials

Introduce yourself and let the official know if you are a constituent. Whether you live in the official's district or not, clearly state one or two reasons for contacting the official and what you would like them to do. Your company's experience or your own experience is the best information you can share. Indicate how the issue will affect your company.

Use your own words, don't copy a form letter or e-mail that has been sent to you as an example. Sending organized postcards or pre-written messages has little effect.

Do not state that you have significant influence. Write as yourself, don't become a self-appointed spokesperson. If you are the spokesperson for a group, be sure to identify the group and explain that your comments are on behalf of that group.

Close the communication with your "ask." Express exactly what you would like them to do—support the legislation, vote 'no' on the issue, change language in the bill to make the bill more effective and/or acceptable.

Be sure you give your elected official time to consider your point and confer with others before they must vote on the issue. Sometimes this is not possible; however, by understanding the legislative process, you can determine the best time to provide input on an issue.

Make sure you address, in writing or face-to-face, the elected official by his/her title, unless you have been on a first name basis for some time. Even then, this person has been elected to their position, respecting their election and title is suggested.

Be polite in your message and demeanor when writing or visiting an elected official. Remain reasonable and constructive; provide only the facts, not rumor. Do not threaten, exaggerate or be offensive or rude. Elected officials are human and attacking them is not an effective communication tool.

Pick your battles. Commenting on issue after issue will negate any effective communication you have. Keep your communications effective by choosing a few of the most important issues to express your views.

Thank the official for his/her time to read your message or listen to you. If the official follows through with your recommendation, thank them. A personal and complimentary written message is always appreciated.

Be aware at the state and federal level, legislation must be passed the House and Senate and then approved by the Governor or President. Compromises may be necessary to obtain the necessary votes. Compromise is not a dirty word—many times it leads to the best outcome.

Governing bodies, particularly at the state and federal level, have thousands of bills introduced. Only a handful of bills are approved. Assure that if you recommend legislation that it is an important issue that impacts your industry, community, state or nation. Legislation cannot be written to cover every problem that citizens encounter. Be realistic.

If you are asked a question regarding your views, don't panic. Try to anticipate questions an elected official might ask. Seek the opposite view so you are prepared. If the question is one you cannot answer, let the official know and that you will attempt to find the answer. Make sure you provide the information or your lack of further information to the official in a timely basis.

In all communications, it is most important that you and others remain calm. Elected officials are weighing various viewpoints from many. They are receiving information from their staff and professionals in the field on the topic. There may be political implications. In the end they must weigh all the information they have available and make a decision. In a democracy that is what we expect our elected officials to do. Sometimes the decision may not be what we wanted it to be. Remember there will likely be other issues in the future where you might need their assistance and they may make a decision that you prefer. This is our governing process. Maintain a good working relationship and reach out again—you may be on the winning side this time.

