

# Effective Communication with Elected Officials

1. Know what you hope to accomplish – are you simply sharing information, or will you be asking them for something? If you are asking them to do something, be specific, and make sure it is something they can actually do – provide leadership, sponsor legislation, vote for specific legislation, meet with constituents in the community, etc.
2. Choose a method of communication – a request to vote for a bill can be done with a phone call or short email. Longer, more complicated messages should be presented in writing or in a meeting.
3. Explain why you are relevant – you are relevant to elected officials because you live, work or serve people in the areas they represent. Be able to show the connection.
4. Understand your audience – Learn about an elected official's position on your issues before you contact them. They may already be sympathetic or supportive.
5. Frame your message – It also helps to know something about the issues an elected official feels strongly about, even if they aren't the same as your own. Look for ways to frame your message in ways that make sense to them. For example, if you want to talk about health care costs with someone who is very interested in fiscal issues, talk about your issue as an investment, or perhaps the long-term costs of not addressing an issue now.
6. Develop a compelling story – It's good to have facts, figures and statistics to support your position, but it is also important to bring a human perspective. Let them know how the policies they are considering directly impact their constituents. Relate the concerns of others as well as your own experiences and feelings if appropriate.
7. Be prepared, but do not feel the need to be an expert – Do your homework, but keep it real. Know when to admit “I don't know” and offer to follow up with the information. Be open to counter arguments but do not become argumentative.
8. Listen well – remember that you are there to build a relationship. You should be listening, looking for indications of the elected official's views and finding opportunities to provide good information. If he or she has been supportive in the past, be sure to acknowledge your appreciation during the course of the visit. If the opposite is true, try to be positive. Some day, on an issue of importance to you, s/he may come through. In the meantime, your visit may prevent the official from being an active opponent.
9. Don't stay too long – Try to get closure on your issue. If you hear what you had hoped for, express your thanks and leave. If you reach an impasse, thank him/her, even if disappointed, and say so. Leave room to continue the discussion at another time.
10. Follow up – be sure to send a thank-you note after an extended call or visit. Be sure to include additional information if you were asked to provide it. If commitments were made during the visit, repeat your understanding of them. If staff members were present, write to them too, as they can often be important allies. This follow up will earn you the attention of, and potentially more support from, the elected official.

