

WRITING TO YOUR CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

For many people, it's hard to know the best way to contact a U.S. senator or representative, and then feel confident that the message has gotten through. Is anyone listening? Do those e-mails from advocacy groups really count for anything? Are some types of contact more effective than others?

The answer to all of these questions is “yes”. And, you may be relieved to know that the old fashioned rules of correspondence still apply in today's high tech world—take the time to tailor your letter to the recipient and be polite. Whether you use snail mail, send an e-mail message or make a phone call, these time-tested principles combined with relevant, persuasive arguments will bring attention to the issues that concern you most.

According to Jenny B. Levy, a former staffer on Capitol Hill and the manager of Grassroots Advocacy for the American Immigration Lawyers Association, “If you want a response, you have to take a little more time than just hitting ‘send’ or ‘reply’. You have to think about how to address your member of Congress.”

DRAFT A LETTER

For correspondence, be sure to include your contact information so that the official's staff knows where to reach you. In the first sentence, state why you are sending the letter or e-mail message. For example, “Millions of Americans are suffering from laughing sickness, and I urge you to vote in support of HR-0000: Laughing Sickness Research Funding.”

The paragraphs that follow should provide personalized examples of why the issue is important to you. In the case of laughing sickness, has it affected you or your family? What's been the impact on your community? How will a vote in favor of the bill help the community? What will happen if the official takes no action at all? If you have them, share data, facts or figures. End the letter stating the purpose once again and summarizing why this action is important.

MAKE THE CALL

These tips apply to phone calls as well. State the reason for your call and then say why that is important to you. And, keep a level head no matter how passionate you are about the topic. “One of the biggest mistakes constituents make is being really angry and shouting,” says Levy.

VISIT CAPITOL HILL

However, she notes, “The most effective way to have your voice heard is to actually go to Capitol Hill or the district office. We encourage our members to send a fax requesting a meeting and follow-up with a phone call.” If the matter is more personal, Levy recommends visiting the district office.

MAKE SOME “NOISE”

Another effective way to draw the attention is using the newspaper. “They pay attention to the news from back home and keep clips.” Submit a letter to the editor of your local paper or contribute an opinion/editorial article.

And, what about those form letters that advocacy groups encourage members to send en masse? “They tally the numbers to present on the Hill,” explains Levy. But, your letter won’t get read unless you personalize it. Again, take that well-written frame and edit it to convey your interest in the issue.

If nothing changes after the first letter or phone call, don’t give up. “Democracy only works if we all speak,” says Levy. “And, it takes persistence.”

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