

Top Ten Tips for Calling Your Legislator

Making a phone call to your legislator is quick, easy, and can be done at a moment's notice, making it an attractive method for legislative contact. For these same reasons, it is critical that the phone call be effective. You don't need to be an expert on the issue in order to be persuasive; you just need to give your personal perspective. Follow these ten steps for an effective call to your legislator:

- 1. Plan:** Before you make the call, plan what you are going to say. Your phone call will be very brief, so keep your message simple and to-the-point. Take a moment to think about it—you might even want to make some notes—and you'll find that your call goes more smoothly than if you were to call “off the cuff”. Know your request (for example, vote for a specific bill) in as few words as possible.
- 2. Message:** After identifying (and possibly writing down) your request, think about a key point or personal story that supports your position.
- 3. Call:** Make the call. If your legislator is in your home district on specific days or on weekends, call them when they are in your home district. There is more time and less distraction, and your position as a constituent will be enhanced if you are talking on “home turf”.
- 4. Staff or Message:** You may not be able to reach your legislator if you are calling his or her office during the legislative session. Be prepared to talk to one of the legislator's staff or to leave a message instead. Make sure you get the staff person's full name, and treat them with the respect.
- 5. Constituent:** Begin by stating that you are a constituent. Legislators are most responsive to the people who can keep them in office—their constituents.
- 6. Persuade:** Get to the point. Following your plan, state the reason for the call. Try to get the legislator to state their position on the issue, and try to persuade them using the points you developed.
- 7. Thank:** If the legislator agrees to support your issue, thank them. Regardless of their position, thank the legislator for their time. Let them know that you will be tracking the issue.
- 8. Recruit:** Recruit a like-minded friend, family member, or colleague to make a call as well. Particularly with phone calls, quantity is critical. Legislators pay attention to issues when they believe that many of their constituents care about that issue.
- 9. Report your call:** When you are part of a grassroots lobbying effort, your participation is helpful only if the people mobilizing the effort know about it. Let your agency or ARRM know you made the call.
- 10. Call Back:** Call more than once. Quantity is as important, if not more important, than quality in grassroots advocacy, because a high number of calls indicates to a legislator that many people in their district care about an issue. As you monitor the issue, call back to ask for specific support or action as appropriate to the process.



Legislative Contact Toolkit

Top Ten Tips for Writing or Emailing Your Legislator

Writing a letter to your legislator offers you the opportunity to give more information that you could in a phone call. It can also be an effective strategy for following up on a phone call, visit, or email. The disadvantage to writing letters is that they do not have the opportunity to ask questions, state their position, or respond to a specific request. For these reasons, you might consider following your letter with a phone call or visit for more interaction.

E-mail has changed the way that we communicate and in many ways has replaced other forms of communication, such as phone calls or handwritten letters. This technological tool is fast, cheap, and efficient. However, because it is a fast and relatively informal means of communication, many legislators view it as less credible than other methods.

- 1. Begin by stating that you are a constituent.** Make sure that you write your return address on the envelope, so that the legislator's office staff knows immediately that you are a constituent. If sending an email; In the subject line of the message, state that you are a constituent (For example—Subject: Message from a constituent on xyz issue). Most legislators have their staff sort and respond to their e-mail, and this strategy will increase the likelihood that your letter is read.
- 2. Personalize your letter and email.** Research consistently shows that handwritten letters have the most impact. If you are basing your letter on a form letter or form email, rewrite it, or at least retype it. Photocopies of generic letters and model emails are the least effective. In making your case on the issue, use personal examples.
- 3. Use the news.** Watch news stories in your local community that you can use to illustrate your point or include a story about what you experience in your work.
- 4. Local, local, local.** Make a strong connection between the issue and your local community that the legislator represents. Again, use local examples that illustrate why your issue is important and why

your position is a strong one. Don't be afraid to tell your story or talk about your personal experience with the issue.

- 5.** If the legislator has supported your issues in the past, acknowledge this—but don't take it for granted that the support will continue. **Give reasons why the legislator should continue or intensify his or her support.**
- 6. State your request concisely.** Again, e-mail is less formal and much more brief than traditional written communication and written letters are less likely to be read if they are too lengthy. Craft your message accordingly—keep it tight and short. Show restraint. Keep your letter or email brief— one to one and half pages at the most (if letter). Make sure that supporting information that you leave behind is brief as well.
- 7. Persuade** a like-minded friend, family member, or colleague to write a letter or send an email as well. Legislators pay attention to issues when they believe that many of their constituents care about that issue.
- 8. Report your correspondence.** When you are part of a grassroots lobbying effort, your participation is most helpful when the people mobilizing the effort know about it. Let your agency or ARRM know that you wrote the letter or emailed, and what you intend to do to follow up.
- 9. Follow up.** In the correspondence, ask your legislator for a response. To get a better picture of your legislator's position, consider following your letter or email with a phone call or visit.
- 10. Communicate more than once.** Again, quantity is as important, if not more important, than quality in grassroots advocacy. One letter will not gain influence. As you monitor the issue, communicate with the legislator through phone calls, additional letters, e-mail, or visits to ask for specific support or action as appropriate to the process.



Legislative Contact Toolkit

Top Ten Tips for “Printable” Letters to the Editor

An underused resource in grassroots advocacy is the local media. Letters to the editor can be powerful vehicles for influencing or inspiring public debate, making the case for your issue, or responding to related events. In addition, elected officials always read the opinion pages of their local paper, because it gives them an idea of what their constituents think. The trick is to write a letter that the editors find compelling enough to print. Use these tips to write a letter that is more likely to get printed:

- 1. Capitalize on the hot stories.** Find ways to tie stories in the news with your issue. Open your letter to a reference to the recent event, and then quickly build a logical bridge to your issue.
- 2. Keep it brief.** Most Letters to the Editor should be under 250 words. Edit your letter aggressively.
- 3. Be clear.** This may seem obvious, but a surprising number of letters that don't get published just plain don't make sense. Avoid jargon, use common vocabulary, and let a few friends or colleagues review the letter for you before you send it.
- 4. Use word cues to underscore your point.** For instance, preface your major conclusion with “The important thing is,…” If you have research that makes your case, preface the facts with “Research proves that…”
- 5. Don't overlook neighborhood weeklies and smaller papers.** Often these publications have more room for letters, and community papers have very large readerships.
- 6. Include a call to action or solution.** If you are illustrating a need or making a case for a specific action, include a line about what people can do to help.
- 7. Don't be afraid to toot your own horn.** If you -- or your organization -- are involved in work that addresses the issue, include that in your letter.
- 8. Be passionate, but not poisonous.** There is a difference between “fire in the belly” and righteous indignation. Avoid sarcasm, and if you're angry, cool off a bit before sending a final version.
- 9. Use local or personal angles.** All grassroots strategies rely on the local and the personal in an issue. Include this perspective in the letter to illustrate why readers should care about the issue.
- 10. Try meeting with editorial boards.** The editorial boards on newspapers often meet with community members, and sometimes will write an editorial based on information they receive from these meetings. Ask for a meeting with your local paper's editorial board, make a case for your issue, and ask them to support it with an editorial.



Legislative Contact Toolkit

Meeting Your Legislator

A face-to-face meeting with your legislator can be a powerful opportunity to advance your agenda. The meeting can also position you as a reliable expert on your issue and an important ally for your legislator...if it's done right. Follow these steps for a successful visit:

- 1. Plan your meeting.** Decide whether you are going alone, or with a group of constituents. If you go as a group, decide who is going to lead the meeting, and what each person is going to contribute to the discussion. This will help eliminate awkward silences or repetitive messages, and will ensure that you hit all the key points you want to cover. You will likely have only 10 to 20 minutes for your meeting, so plan accordingly.
- 2. If there are multiple issues that are important to you, select one that you will discuss for that meeting.** Attempting to persuade a legislator on multiple issues not only weakens your position as a reliable, focused constituent, but it dilutes your impact on each issue.
- 3. Define your message.** Focus your comments on one issue. Then, rather than trying to say everything you know or think about that issue, plan two or three observations or arguments that get at the heart of your position.
- 4. Make an appointment with their scheduler....** but don't be surprised if it changes. Legislators often have last-minute hearings or committee meetings. Be flexible.
- 5. Meet in your home district.** Meetings in the home district are often less hurried than meetings at the capitol, and they provide the "home turf" advantage. Find out when your legislator is in his or her home district, and schedule your appointment then, or if your workplace illustrates your position, invite them to visit you. If this is not possible, travel to the capitol as an alternative.
- 6. Once you're in the door, begin by finding something personal that you have in common with the legislator.** Do they live on the street where your mother grew up? Are their kids in your child's class at school? Does something in their office suggest an interest that you share, such as fishing, sports, or art? Engage in a little "small talk" to break the ice—but keep it brief.

- 7. State the reason for your visit.** Be clear about why you are there, why they should be interested (remember to mention again that you're a constituent, and use local examples), and what you want them to do.
- 8. State your case.** Again, keep it concise, focused, and personalized.
- 9. Invite comments and questions.** Engage your legislator in dialogue. Don't worry if they ask you something you don't know the answer to—simply tell them you don't know, but that you'll find out for them.
- 10. State only what you know.** Don't overstate your case, fudge the facts, or guess.
- 11. Ask for a commitment.** If you don't ask your legislator for action, you won't see any. If they decline, encourage them to think about it, and let them know you'll keep in touch.
- 12. Have a leave-behind.** Provide your legislator with brief, written information for further reflection. Make sure it contains the local angle for your district.
- 13. Report on your visit.** As soon as possible after your visit, jot down notes that record the tone, what was said, and what questions were asked in the meeting. Not only will this help in reporting on your visit, but it will help you build a record of your relationship with your legislator that can inform future dialogue. Let your group know that you made the visit, and report what you covered and what the legislator said. If possible, provide them with a copy of your leave-behind materials as well.
- 14. Follow up.** Send a handwritten thank-you note to your legislator. Let them know that you appreciate their time. If you promised to get them additional information, provide it or let them know how and when they can expect to receive it.
- 15. Visit more than once.** Over time, visit with your legislator to continue to discuss the issue and make requests as you have them. Be sure to be a reliable source of information for them on your issue by delivering what you promise, avoiding overstatement, and communicating clearly.