



The Top Ten Things Elected Officials and Their Staffs Hate to Hear

All policymakers and his or her staff have tales to tell about their, well, "interesting" meetings - like those advocates who start their pitch with, "you never agree with me and always take money from the other side. I don't even know why I'm here. But do you think you could vote for this legislation? What if I paid for your vote with a big campaign contribution?" With a few notable exceptions, that approach is likely to get you shown to the door - and quick.

Or how about those folks who are outraged to meet with a staff person instead of an elected official? They may say something like "I have to meet with just you? Isn't there someone more important I can talk to? I don't think you'll be able to understand this complicated issue." Hmmm, that doesn't sound like a good way to make friends and influence people.

And then there are those groups that literally back policymakers in to a corner at public events, all the while shaking their fingers and saying things like "We demand an answer right now. After all, we pay your salary. You better do what we say." Again, while thinking that is okay, saying it is not always the best way to get to persuade opinion leaders.

Needless to say, this is no way to get your policy interest heard on Capitol Hill. Yet many advocates continue to believe that offering to buy votes, being rude to the staff and overwhelming an office with demands for answers works. With a new administration, new Congress and, unfortunately, many of the same old problems, more people than ever are expected to reach out to their elected officials and staff people to discuss policy issues. To be effective, it's critically important to know what NOT to say to elected officials and their staff. Some of these tips may be surprising!

Number 10: "But I thought my appointment was with the Senator. I don't want to meet with "just staff."

Never, ever indicate that you are disappointed in meeting with a staff person. On Capitol Hill, having a good relationship with a staff person can make or break the cause.

Number 9: "Here's some reading material for you - our 300 page annual report."

When meeting with a member of Congress or staff person, try to limit leave-behind materials to one or two pages, and include details on where this information can be located on the Web, if appropriate. Offering the information in a file folder with your organization's name on the label will also help ensure that the materials are put in a file drawer, as opposed to the round file.

Number 8: "How much of a campaign contribution did your boss get to vote against (or for) this bill?"

Believe it or not, most staff have no idea who contributed to their boss' campaigns. Not only is this question insulting, but even if it were accurate, the staff person isn't likely to know.

Number 7: "I assume you know all about H.R. 1234."

With thousands of bills being introduced during each Congress, no staff person will be able to keep them all straight. Always provide information on the bill title, number, cosponsors and general provisions when communicating with a Congressional office.

Number 6: “No, I don’t have an appointment, but I promise I’ll only take ½ hour of your time.”

Unless it’s an emergency, or you are good friends with the elected official or staff person, try not to engage in the dreaded “stop-by.” Most staff are happy to try to set up a meeting if you are relevant to the office (i.e., you are a constituent).

Number 5: No, I don’t really need anything specific.

If you don’t ask for something – a bill cosponsorship, a congressional record statement, a meeting in the district, whatever – staff will wonder why you came by. Updates on your issue are fine, so long as they are accompanied by a request. That will ensure that someone in the office thinks about you and your issue for longer than five minutes.

Number 4: What you’re telling me can’t be right. I heard Jon Stewart of The Daily Show say otherwise.

Jon Stewart is hilarious, but the phrase “opening monologue” should be a big clue as to whether you should take his assertions with a grain of salt. Most staff, or members for that matter, won’t lie to you. They know that lying will get them in big trouble. Sometimes, they may see things differently than you do, but if they say a bill definitely is not going to be considered on the floor, or if there is no such legislation, I’d believe them. A perfect example is a petition that was floating around the Internet about a House bill number 602P from Rep. Schnell that would impose fees on use of e-mail. There is no such thing as either House bill 602P (that’s not even a possible number), nor is there a Rep. Schnell.

Number 3: We have 10 (or more) people in our group.

Congressional offices are tiny. If you have more than five people in your group, you’ll be standing out in the hallway. Plus, having so many people talking at once can dilute the impact of your message. Try to limit your group to no more than 5.

Number 2: What do you mean we have to stand in the hall?

See number 3. A request to meet in the hallway is simply an indication of space limitations. Nothing else.

Number 1: No, I don’t represent anyone from your district. I just thought you’d be interested in what I have to say.

Members are elected to represent their constituents. Period. If you are not their constituent, you are not relevant to them. Some members do rise to higher standards, but that just means they represent the interest of other members, not the entire nation. Your time is always best spent working with your own elected official and turning them into an advocate for your cause.

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