

## How to Talk To Your Legislators

There is nothing more politically powerful and effective than a local businessperson involved in grassroots political action. You may be reluctant to get involved in politics--it is easy to assume that someone else will do it. But if an issue affects your ability to do business, then you are the best person to communicate with your legislator and ask him or her for help.

Nothing sticks in a legislator's mind like a persuasive story from a local business or organization. It is even better if that story comes from someone whom he or she already knows in the community, and whom they will see again.

Grassroots activity can be broken into two main components: relationship building and communication. Each of these two components is individually important. But when done together as a comprehensive grassroots effort, it produces the best results.

### **Relationship Building**

Having a personal relationship with your senator and representative is the single most important step to a grassroots strategy. Think of it the same way you would with an important customer: this is a long-term relationship. This is best done when the legislature is not in session.

A good way to build this relationship is to invite your legislator (or a candidate) to visit your facility. Familiarize legislators with your business and the products or services you provide. Tell them your concerns. Introduce the legislator to your employees or let an employee do the introductions.

Create a steady stream of communication. Your legislator will rely on you as a source of information and advice when faced with decisions on business issues. A little known secret is that, apart from administrative help, legislators have almost no staff and have to sort through the potential effects of hundreds of bills each year. They need and want your guidance. Let them hear from you.

### **Communications**

#### **General Tips for Contacting Legislators:**

**Make Your Contact Early.** Time your contact so that your letter or telephone call is received before significant action is taken. Also, contact legislators in other districts where you do business.

**Be Logical.** An emotional appeal is not enough. Back your arguments with facts and substance. Explain how the proposed legislation will affect you.

**Be Specific.** Refer to an issue by bill number and discuss its content. Do not assume that your elected official can recall the complete details of every bill filed during a session. Clearly identify the action (support, oppose, amend) you would like your legislator to take. If you are interested in several different bills, do not dilute what you have to say by trying to discuss them all at once. Telephone or write on each individual topic.

**Be Brief.** Give your position and make your point as clearly and concisely as possible.

**Be Positive and Cordial.** Your tone should be businesslike, clear and cordial. Never ask the impossible or threaten to vote for someone else next election. Always saying 'thanks' and 'well done' makes a legislator feel appreciated and therefore more receptive later.

**Identify Yourself.** Sign all correspondence and include your address and telephone number. Your legislator may want to get back in touch with you. When expressing the official view of your company or organization, use its official letterhead.

**Use the Proper Format.** Type your letter. Use the proper salutation and, if you do not know your legislators on a personal basis, use their titles and last names (e.g., Dear Senator Smith or Dear Representative Jones). Check the spelling of their names.

**Request a Reply.** Ask your legislators how they feel about the issue, but without being demanding. As their constituent, you have a right to know. Ask for their feedback.

**Say Thanks.** Letters or calls to legislators praising their positive actions are vital builders of goodwill. So often they only hear when something is wrong. Saying thanks when appropriate is effective and appreciated.

**Share what you Learn.** Mail, fax or e-mail copies of your correspondence, plus a copy or description of the response, to fellow business leaders.

### **Letter Writing Guidelines:**

Keep in mind that letters can be faxed or e-mailed. If faxed or e-mailed due to time constraints, it is best to follow up with a hard copy so legislators can have it in their files. Following up with a telephone call is a good idea. The sample letter below illustrates these points, with the numbers in the letter referring back to this page.

1. Use your personal or business letterhead and sign your name over your typed signature at the end of your message.

2. Be sure your exact address is on the letter itself. Envelopes can be thrown away before return addresses are noted.
3. Identify your subject clearly. State the name of the bill you are writing about and give the house or senate bill number.
4. If applicable, identify yourself as a member of a trade or industry association in the letter. This will let the legislator know you will be keeping up with the issue through the association's communications, and will help the association be more effective when it's lobbying staff talks to the legislator about the issue.
5. State the reason for writing. Your own personal experience is your best supporting evidence. Explain how the issue would affect you, your organization or business and what impact it could have on your community.
6. Ask your legislator to give his or her position in the reply letter. As a constituent, you are entitled to know.
7. Copy your letter to your trade association or organizational head. Again, your legislator will see that a decision-maker has been 'cc:'d' and that you are involved in the business community.

· Be reasonable. Do not ask for the impossible. Do not threaten. Never say, 'I won't vote for you unless you support my position.' The legislator will have to vote on many other issues before you have the opportunity to carry out any threat.

· Thank your legislator if he or she responds positively. Everybody appreciates a complimentary letter and remembers your kindness. A thank you letter is not just polite, but lets your legislator know you are following issues to their conclusion. On the other hand, if a vote is contrary to your position, do not hesitate to let him or her know.

### **Telephone Call Guidelines:**

- Introduce yourself as a businessperson, employee and a constituent.
- Be polite and friendly with whoever answers the phone. When the legislature is in session, any number of people can answer the phone: a secretary, aide, intern or even the legislator. All are knowledgeable and professional. Take the time to talk.
- Identify your subject clearly: state the name of the bill and give the house or senate bill number. If you don't know specifics, ask for staff assistance to tell you the title, number and summary.
- Clearly state your position on the bill and on any amendments. Let them know specifically whether you want them to vote 'yes' or 'no.'

- It's okay to ask for your legislator's position on the issue. Be very specific: ask if the legislator intends to vote 'yes' or 'no.' It is very difficult to hold them accountable later if you do not ask that question.
- If you talk to the legislator personally, feel free to share your personal experiences and the reason for your opinion.
- Treat the legislator's time respectfully. Thank him or her for taking the time to listen. If the legislator agrees with your position, thank him or her and tell others in your community.

### **Face-to-Face Visit Guidelines:**

- Appointments are not necessarily required, but are strongly recommended.
- Introduce yourself as a constituent to the legislator and office staff. Many people come through the offices each day, and you want to be remembered as someone from home.
- Meet the staff. They are knowledgeable and willing to help, even with minor information such as finding your way around town.
- Identify your subject: state the name of the bill and give them the house or senate bill number.
- Come to the meeting prepared to clearly state your thoughts and arguments on the issue. Since legislators see many people on many issues, it is helpful to leave behind a brief written reminder of your position, even on the back of your business card.
- As a constituent you are entitled to know your legislator's position on the issue. Ask specifically if they intend to vote 'yes' or 'no' on the bill. Listen carefully to his or her answer, and if it is not clear to you, ask them again.
- Thank your legislator for his or her time in any event. Particularly thank him or her if the response was positive. Follow it up with a brief thank you note, whether or not the legislator agreed with your position. That again lets your legislator know you will be following this issue to its conclusion.