Writing Elected Officials: Letters and Email

A letter expressing a particular viewpoint may sway an elected official's viewpoint – especially if he or she is wavering on the issue. It is important that the legislator receives your viewpoint while the issue is being debated before the vote. The key to grassroots success is the show of concern from constituents who care. Personal correspondence will carry that message. Your message should be presented as effectively as possible in written correspondence.

The following are some helpful hints when writing elected officials.

Introductions:

- Your name and home or work address should be included on both letter and mailing envelope.
- Include your name in the first line of your letter along with the name of your organization and/or the fact that you are a constituent.
- Write directly to the elected official representing you. Letters received from citizens outside that district or state would be referred elsewhere.
- Always send a personal letter on your own stationery – never send a form letter. Remember that you are writing from the standpoint of a concerned citizen or industry professional; a form letter may defeat your purpose.

Be Frank:

- State your purpose at the outset and then utilize the remainder of your letter to expand your views.
- Attempt to confine the letter to one subject. Too much information may decrease the force of your argument and complicate your legislator's efforts to act upon it.
- Be brief - although brevity should not be achieved at the expense of clarity and completeness. A letter more than one page in length might not be read immediately.
- Do not assume a legislator is as well-informed as you about a given problem. Explain the situation clearly and concisely. Remember that a legislator (even the most knowledgeable and eloquent) cannot keep abreast of everything.
- If your industry, interest group, or organization has talking points, then use them in your letter to support your viewpoint.
- Letters concerning a particular piece of legislation should include the assigned reference number, as well as the subject matter. Several bills may have been introduced pertaining to the same topic. For example: House bill: H.R. ____; Senate bill: S.____
- The letter's conclusion should clearly state whether you want the official to support or oppose the legislation.

Personalize:

- Elected officials want to hear how the legislation you are writing about will affect your life, your business, and your employees.
- Attitude is important. Polite and positive-sounding correspondence may be more impressive than belligerent or negative-sounding correspondence.

- While many topics addressed in correspondence to legislators are of an emotional nature, beware of the use of nonfactual arguments. Your view will only be weakened if you use them.
- Elected officials seldom base decisions on mere philosophy. They want to know exactly how votes will affect their constituents and, subsequently, their re-election. State the facts and use clear illustrations. Reciting barren concepts will result in an ineffective letter.

Addressing Correspondence:

- Be sure to follow the proper etiquette for addressing elected officials. All members of Congress should be called "Honorable" on the envelope and with the internal address. PLEASE NOTE: If you send a U.S. Postal Service expect a delay in delivery as well as a response because all mail sent to the U.S. Capital Building goes through an extensive security search. It may take up to six (6) weeks for delivery. There is a shorter delivery time at state capital buildings.

To a Senator:

The Honorable (Full Name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510
Dear Senator:

To a Representative of Congress:

The Honorable (Full Name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
Dear Representative:

Request a Response:

- Ask for a reply. Request that your elected official write you back to let you know where they stand on your issue of concern.
- Do not be surprised if you receive a general response. Do not be discouraged.
- If you receive a response letter it means your letter was read and counted. That is the most important thing.

Thank you:

- Follow up with a letter of thanks when an elected official responds to you as requested. A handwritten note is best used here. In the case of Members of Congress, it is suggested to send U.S. Postal Service mail to their district office.
- If your elected official supports a piece of legislation important to you or you, write your lawmaker a note of thanks and let them know you appreciate their work and service.

E-mailing Elected Officials

E-mailing elected officials has become an overused aspect of mass political communication vehicles aimed at providing volume over substance. If the intent of the communication is personal, strategic, or specific follow-up to past action, e-mail is not the best communication tool. The exception to this rule is if you have the private e-mail address of the elected official and have fully established a relationship worthy of use. It is highly recommended that you seek and are granted direct permission to use the private e-mail address. A written letter or handwritten personal note is more appropriate.

In general, the same guidelines apply as with writing letters to elected officials. The following tips provide specific instructions to use when e-mailing your elected officials.

Introductions:

- Most offices receive thousands or tens of thousands of e-mails a week. The most important e-mails are those from constituents.
- Always include your street address, city, state, and zip code at the top of your e-mail so the office knows your message is from a constituent and needs attention.
- Include your name, organization, and the fact that you are a constituent in the first line of your e-mail.
- Write directly to the elected official representing you. E-mails received from citizens outside that district or state would be referred elsewhere.

Content:

- Address only one issue in each e-mail.
- The closing sentence of your message should always reiterate exactly what you are asking the elected official to do.

Request a Response:

- Many offices will respond to e-mails by sending an auto-response (generic) acknowledging that the office received your e-mail. These offices usually follow up with a written letter response.
- If you receive a response letter it means your letter was read and counted. That's the most important thing.

PLEASE NOTE: Standard Mail delivery to federal or state legislators has been significantly delayed due to heightened security measures so electronic communication (e-mail) for constituent contact is generally preferred by member's offices.

Send a letter when your member does something that deserves a thank you.

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