



Knowing Your Audience: The Staff

Is it better to spend one minute doing a "grip and grin" or "hello there" conversation with a legislator, or fifteen to twenty minutes discussing a substantive policy issue with staff? The answer should be pretty clear. It's often exciting to meet with a member of Congress, but it won't move your policy issue forward as well as a conversation with his or her staff people. So never feel that it's a waste of time to meet with "just staff." In fact, these individuals can be instrumental in addressing your concerns.

Don't feel disappointed if you've been asked to speak or meet with the staff person instead of the legislator. Consider this -- as shown in the chart below, each member of the US House represents about **750,000** people. If they met with just **5%** of those people for **five minutes** every year, that equates to **187,000 minutes** per year. Assuming legislators work ten hours per day, every day, that comes out to **312 days per year** of meetings with constituents. Is that how you want your elected officials to be spending all their time? When would they have time to do the other things you really want them to do?

Time Spent Meeting with Constituents



District/State Staff vs. Washington, D.C. Staff

Members of Congress have at least two offices, one in Washington, D.C., and one or more in their district or state. House Members usually have one or two district offices, depending upon the geographical area they serve. Senate offices generally have two to five offices within the state, some of which may be staffed by only one person. Each office has a number of staffers with various responsibilities. The average House Member has a total of 14 staff people (in D.C. and the district). In the Senate, the amount of funding available for staff positions varies depending on the population of the state. Senators from less populated states have an average of 31 staffers, while senators from more-populated states have an average of 44. Communicating effectively with your representatives can hinge on reaching the right staff person.

Tips on Working with Staff

Regardless of whether you're dealing with federal staff, state staff or even local staff, following are some tips for interacting with these hard-working individuals:

Staff contact has advantages over Member contact -- First and foremost, recognize that meeting with a staff person, rather than directly with the policymaker, is often to your advantage. Staff can take a little more time to delve in to a particular issue and gain a greater understanding of why what you're proposing is such a great idea. With a little work on your part, they can become advocates for your cause within the policymaker's office. A great deal of what actually gets done, whether it's an appropriation for a particular project or a regulatory change to help your industry, is done through the initiative and sweat of the staff, so never feel like your communications with them are a waste of time. Having the ear of a staffer who likes your issue, wants to work on it, and, most important, wants his or her boss to spend time on it, can only help your cause.

Talk to the right person -- Many people are under the mistaken impression that they should always try to communicate with the most senior staff person (for example, the LD or the AA at the federal level) in a policymaker's office. While having a positive relationship with senior staff can be helpful, it is best to communicate with the person in the office who handles the issues you care about, no matter their position in the office. In most cases, when you call senior staff to request a meeting on a particular issue, you will simply be directed to the person who has responsibility for that issue. This is the individual who will provide advice to the member and senior staff on voting, bill co-sponsorships, and letter sign-ons. By starting with that person, you save yourself a step and the irritating feeling of being passed around. It will also avoid any conflict with that person about the perception that you may be "going over their head" to get something done.

Remember, your issue is one of many -- Staff handle a bewildering array of issues. They simply cannot know about everything related to any of their issue areas. This is especially true for issues that are not directly related to the member's committee or legislative agenda. The purpose of any meeting with a policymaker's staff and/or the member should be to share with them your views on issues you care about. If they aren't familiar with the issue, take that as a perfect opportunity to bring them up to speed!

Institutional memory in a policymaker's office can be short -- Because of the wide-array of issues and high staff turnover, you may sometimes be surprised to find entirely new people working on your issues. Depending upon the office, these turnovers can happen once every few months to once every couple of years. You might need to bring someone up to speed at a moment's notice.

Expect (and appreciate) youth -- Most staffers are young, 25 or younger. The person you're meeting with may not look as if he or she is old enough to vote! Don't let that throw you. In most cases, staffers are bright and capable individuals who can be trusted to respond appropriately to your requests and deliver your message to your representative or senator.