

Tips for Taking Action, Getting a Response and Making an Impact

What's the best use of a "regular" person's time?

1. The volume of letters and e-mails received by Congressional offices is enormous, often overwhelming. Standardized responses are the norm. Personalized emails, letters and editorials are more effective than telephone calls. Calls/letters from non-constituents are a complete waste of time. Focus on your own representatives.
2. Phone calls are usually answered by "staff assistants" who are even lower on the totem pole than "legislative correspondents". Tallies of calls might be made, but actual responses are rare.
3. House staff sizes are small. Senate offices are much larger, and there may be a better chance of response. Letters from presidents of national organizations often get more attention, and perhaps an individualized response.
4. Know what legislative or policy actions are currently in the queue. Where appropriate, name specific bills or policies. Be concise and specific in your communications.
5. When contacting a Senator or Representative (or an official of the administration), try to formulate your discussion in terms of what is known to be important to them, not necessarily which aspects of your request are most important to you. For example: right now the focus of the political stakeholders is on job creation, so use that: science is a huge job-creator, not just in terms of the current jobs in the science-related industry, but in terms of opening up whole new areas of innovation that are going to need jobs.
Action: Find out what committees your representatives serve on (posted on their web page). Use this information to tailor your approach.
6. The most effective way to get a Senator or Representative involved in an issue is via a personal connection.
Action: do you know any of your local, state, or national representatives personally, or do you know someone who does? If not, what can you do to make that connection? Attend town hall meetings? Attend a fundraiser? It only takes one Senator or Representative who is really on your side to make a difference, particularly if that person is on a key committee of jurisdiction. Sometimes, one Senator's question of an agency head at the agency's annual appropriations hearing can get some action.
7. Some Representatives and Senators seem to be considerably influenced by national celebrities. Furthermore, a national celebrity is probably much more likely to get a meeting with the actual Rep or Sen, rather than just a meeting with the staff legislative assistant.
Question: can this work on a local scale? You may not know a national celebrity, but if you know someone who is locally prominent and cares about a particular issue, talk to them about taking action.
8. Money. If you give enough money, then you may get to sit at the same table as the Sen or Rep during a fund-raiser. Money may not buy influence, but in large enough amounts it does buy access, so at least you can tell your story. That's how lobbyists do it, but on a bigger scale.

Prepare in advance

For example:

Topic: Importance of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) to the U.S. economy

Develop Talking Points:

- science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) create jobs and drive the U.S. economy.
- Strong STEM equals a strong society and a strong economy.
- Continued innovation and discovery requires open access to all data and top minds around the world.

Discussion:

- Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) create jobs and drive the U.S. economy. From the clothes on your back and the food on your table to the car you drive in and the roads you drive on, STEM is there. The electricity you use, the medicine you take, the home you live in and the water you drink, STEM is there. There is no aspect of modern life that is not touched by STEM, there is no current innovation that does not require STEM.
- Strong STEM equals a strong society and a strong economy. Ours is a country of innovation and discovery. We push the edge of what is known and what is possible using STEM. From teaching our children STEM in school through supporting research in STEM with federal funding we continue to improve our nation and the world with our innovation.
- Our strong foundation in STEM has allowed us to be the most innovative country in the world. To keep this momentum going we need the free and open exchange of information and federal funding. To harness their power, results from Federal Institutions, universities and the private sector must be shared. The best and the brightest from around the world must be free to contribute to our top-notch universities and institutions.