

We want to be sure that we answer your questions, address your concerns and, if we have to disagree on an issue, explain why as quickly and clearly as possible. Find some tips for communicating with our office to ensure that your communication is handled appropriately and receives the attention it deserves.

Communicating with any elected official really boils down to four simple steps: Knowing what you want; Knowing who to ask; Knowing how to ask; and Knowing how to follow-up. Following is a quick overview of each of these steps, with links to provide more information.

[Knowing What to Ask](#)

This section explain why it is important to ask for something specific and how to find out more about legislative initiatives in the U.S. Congress.

[Knowing Who to Ask](#)

Under our representative system of government, it is always most effective to work with the elected officials that represent you. That's why Congressman Blumenauer's office focuses on the needs of the residents of the Third Congressional District of Oregon.

[Knowing How to Ask](#)

This section includes tips and techniques for ensuring that your message is heard.

[Following-Up](#)

Almost as important as your initial communication is how you follow up. In this section, we provide you with some advice on timing and how to be most effective.

What is the difference between the "U.S. Congress" and "a Congress"? Why are some members called "Chairman"? What is a "Ranking Minority Member"? If you're confused by legislative terms (and who isn't?), check out our Glossary.

In their 2001 review of Congressional Websites, the Congress Online Project indicated a need for greater explanation of the workings of Congress and the best ways to communicate with Representatives. With this in mind, we have developed some tips to help you get your message to us in the most direct way possible. We thank Stephanie Vance for her help on this project.

Knowing What to Ask

The communications that receive the most attention in our office often ask for something specific, such as signing on to a specific piece of legislation, or voting in a particular way on a bill. Of course, we always appreciate updates and general information on issues you care about. However, you should think about whether there is something specific you would like Congressman Blumenauer to do. For example, if you strongly support efforts to reform the death penalty, you should ask him to cosponsor legislation on that issue, such as H.R. 912, the Innocence Protection Act. To find out what bills have been introduced on any topic, try a keyword search on the Library of Congress' Thomas website at www.congress.gov.

When considering what you want, be sure that you are asking for something that is actually a federal issue. For example, fixing a pothole on the road in front of your house is something that should be directed to your local elected officials. Following are the kinds of things that you might want to talk to Congressman Blumenauer's office about.

Sponsor, Cosponsor, or Vote for or Against Federal Legislation: On a daily basis, your congressional representative makes important decisions on national policy issues, and you should let him or her know when you strongly support or oppose a certain piece of legislation.

- Site Visits: Ask your elected officials or their staff to visit your program or facility next time they are in the district.
- Letters of Support: Whenever you make a grant request for funds from a federal agency,

contact your Congressional office and ask for a letter of support. Congressional offices receive these types of requests much of the time, and if there are no conflicts with other constituents, are usually happy to oblige. If you want to find out about available grants and loans from the federal government, check out www.cfda.gov

- Research and Reference Information: Your Congressional office has access to a wide-range of research materials from the Library of Congress' Congressional Research Service (CRS), which you can ask for by topic. .

- Tours: Many members of Congress offer tours of the Capitol, including the Capitol dome. They also have access to special tickets for tour of the White House, Library of Congress, and other federal buildings. Call to ask what kinds of tours your Representatives offer.

Knowing Who to Ask

Once you've figured out what you want, it's time to think about who to ask. All of your communications should be directed to the member of Congress who represents where you live or work - that's how representative democracy works! Believe it or not, constituents are the most important and relevant people that members of Congress deal with on a day-to-day basis. One of the most common questions you'll hear in an elected official's office in reference to letters, phone calls, or meeting requests is "Are they from the district?" If the answer is yes, your questions, comments, or concerns must be dealt with in some way.

That's why it is vitally important that you communicate with your own elected officials -- those who represent you directly or who represent your employees. They are the individuals over whom you have the most influence. Congressman Blumenauer, for example, represents the 3rd Congressional District of Oregon. His attention is focused on addressing the needs of individuals who live within that area. If you aren't sure which Congressional District you live in, double-check using the zip-code look-up capability at www.house.gov . To find your Senators, go to www.senate.gov .

Or you can find them all at

www.congress.org

. And remember, these jurisdictions can change after redistricting, so be sure to double-check.

Knowing How to Ask

Members of Congress and their staff need you to tell them how you feel about particular issues. But you have to be sure to deliver your message in the right way. Otherwise, your communication will be lost in the flood of mail, e-mail, phone calls, and faxes that come in to a Congressional office everyday. Following are some tips and techniques that will help ensure that your voice is heard above the fray.

Method of Communication

The methods of communication you chose should depend on the type of message. A simple request to vote for a particular bill can easily be relayed over the phone, while a more complicated message might better be put in writing. Think also about what works best for you in terms of time, energy, personal preference, and money.

Volume Does Not Necessarily Equal Effectiveness

Highly controversial issues can result in a flood of communications to a congressional office. Many offices consider the numbers when making a decision, but only to a point. Sometimes ten thoughtful and well-argued letters can have an equal impact to that of hundreds of calls or postcards.

Always Identify Yourself

It is a waste of time to communicate with your congressional office without identifying yourself. Unidentified information will generally be ignored and thrown away. Because the main duty of a congressional office is to represent the people who live in the congressional district, they need to know who is trying to communicate with them.

Be Specific

If you are interested in a particular piece of legislation, ask your representatives to cosponsor. If your concern is with a federal agency action, ask him or her to send a letter. Whatever it is, the best way to ensure that the office pays attention to your issue is to ask for something specific.

Prioritize Your Requests

If you ask for too many things without making it clear what your top priorities are, the congressional office may feel overwhelmed. Let the office know what actions need the most attention or time your requests so that you are not asking for more than a few things at once.

Offer To Be a Resource

Congressional staff usually are not experts in the issue areas they cover and often turn to trusted outside experts. Knowing that there's someone in the district who really understands a complex issue can be very useful to staff. If you are an expert in your field, let your congressional office know that you can answer any questions they may have.

Be Polite

Treat the staff and the office with the same respect you expect. If you are disagreeable, it will make the staff far less likely to want to work with you in the future. You can be forceful about your views and opinions without being rude.

Always Tell the Truth

Congressional staff turn to outside individuals for advice and assistance on important policy issues all the time. They must feel that they can trust the individuals with whom they are dealing. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them that and let them know you will get back to them.

Don't Vilify Your Opponents

At the very least, you should refrain from labeling those who disagree with you as unenlightened idiots. In fact, you can go even further by fairly presenting the other side's argument and then explaining why you have the stronger counter-argument. It's a great way to build credibility, especially since the staff person you are dealing with most likely will hear from the other side. He or she will realize that you have developed your position based on a careful evaluation of the facts.

Don't Talk About the Campaign with Staff

Many congressional staff get very nervous or even offended when people they are meeting with mention the member's campaign. The laws against staff involvement in their member's campaign are very strict. . In particular, any suggestion that the staff person's help on a legislative issue may translate into a campaign contribution is strictly forbidden. Such a suggestion may, in fact, make a staff person avoid helping you because they are worried it would look bad for their boss.

Persistence Pays

Perhaps the most important thing to remember in dealing with Members of Congress and their staff's is that persistence pays. In many cases, you may have to ask more than once before your congressional office is able to respond to your request.

Effective Meetings

In order to have an effective meeting, you must consider the context. Elected officials and their staff often have meetings all day long on a variety of topics. One minute it may be landscape architects, the next minute it may be people concerned about free trade, and then people with health insurance questions. Jumping from subject to subject can be somewhat confusing and rather chaotic for elected officials. Your job is to bring order to chaos by following these few simple steps.

- Be cognizant of your representative's time limitations. Don't ask for more than one or two meetings per year. Sometimes your message is best delivered by phone or through a staff person.
- Decide where you want to meet (DC vs. the home office), after looking at the congressional calendar (see the House and Senate websites for links to the House and Senate calendars)
- Decide who should deliver your message. Some members may respond better to powerful figures in the community who support you. A real live constituent is always best.
- Limit the number of people you bring to the meeting. Most Congressional offices cannot fit more than five people.
- About one month before the proposed meeting time, fax the scheduler a meeting request, including a brief description of what you want to discuss and attendees. Meeting requests must always be made in writing, as the scheduler will have to pass the request along to several people before a decision is made.
- For Congressman Blumenauer's DC office, you can fax to (202) 225-8941
- For Congressman Blumenauer's District office, you can fax to (503) 230-5413
- Follow-up with a phone call to the scheduler about one-week after sending a written request. Be prepared to send the request again, if asked. This can be frustrating, but it is best to grin and bear it. With the high volume of paper moving through the office, it is not surprising that some requests are misplaced.
- For Congressman Blumenauer's DC office, you can call (202) 225-4811 and ask for the scheduler
- For Congressman Blumenauer's district office, you can call (503) 231-2300 and ask for the scheduler
- Send a "one-pager" about your program before the meeting, nothing more. Most staff and Members do not review materials before meetings - they expect YOU to brief them.
- Be very flexible - your meeting may take place standing up in the hallway, on the run to a vote, or may be canceled with no warning. Members have to deal with sudden and dramatic shifts in their schedules on a daily basis. Unfortunately, this can affect the people they are planning to meet with.
- Make sure you know "who's who" in the meeting, and take down the names of any staff people you may need to deal with in the future.
- Leave behind short, concise, and consistent information.
- Follow up after the meeting on any request you made and information you promised to provide.

Effective Letters and Phone Calls

The key to being effective in your written communications is ensuring that someone on staff actually thinks about what you have to say. This means taking a personal, thoughtful approach, explaining why you're relevant to the office, reaching the right person and, perhaps more important, asking for a response.

The Personal Approach

The most compelling and effective letters and phone calls combine a thoughtful approach to policy issues with a careful explanation of why it's important to you and the member's community. In most offices, it is these letters or phone messages that the elected official actually sees, not the letters or messages generated by mass postcard, form letter, or call-in campaigns.

Why Are You Relevant?

You are relevant to the Congressional office because you are a constituent, and you can demonstrate that connection by including your postal address on every correspondence and as part of every discussion, whether it's e-mail, fax, or traditional letter.

Ask for a Response

Given the limited time and budgets in congressional offices, priority will always be given to letters and inquiries that require an answer. Asking for a response means someone on the staff has to think about what you've said and, in some way, address your concerns or comments.

Reaching the Right Person

Correspondence requesting a meeting or site visit should be sent to the Executive Assistant or Scheduler. Educational and informational correspondence about your work or a particular project should be sent to both the member and legislative assistant assigned to your issue. You can find out who the appropriate staff person is by calling the office at (202) 225-4811 or (503) 231-2300 and asking.

Do You Need a Phone Appointment?

If you want to have a substantive discussion about a particular program or policy issues, you should ask for the staff person who handles that issue and see if you can set up a phone appointment. That way, you can be sure that they have set aside time to talk with you, as opposed to catching them in the middle of a busy day.

Following Up

What you do after your initial contact with members of Congress may be the most important part of the communication process. Taking steps to capture the discussion, share feedback, and follow-up on any requests is the only way to ensure that you and your work will remain on the elected official's "radar-screen." The best way to achieve that goal (without becoming a pest) is through effective follow-up.

It's important to follow-up on your request within three weeks of your initial meeting or other contact. But remember, while following-up and asking again is valuable, being a pest is not. You should follow-up on your request within three weeks, and then about once every three to four weeks until you have a definitive answer. In some cases you may want to let the elected official set the pace. For example, if the staff indicates that they simply cannot respond to your request for two months, then make a note to yourself to call back in two and one-half months.