HOW TO FOLLOW-UP WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Written for the citizen-lobbyist

by

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SITUATION: You wrote a letter to your U.S. Congressman or Senator.* Or, you sent a postcard or signed a petition on an important subject. You're doing your bit and working within the system.

STEP ONE: IF YOU DIDN'T GET A RESPONSE:

If your legislator hasn't answered, you can check the status one of two ways.

(1) Write a follow-up letter (all representatives have the same address: U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515; for senators, it's U.S. Senate, Washington, DC 20510), give the approximate date of your original letter, summarize what you asked for, express surprise at the lack of response, and request a reply about his/her position).

(2) Call the Capitol at 202-224-3121. Ask for the office of the member of the Senate or your Representative. The legislator's receptionist should know about the backlog and whether you should have gotten a reply yet.

TWO: WHAT CONSTITUTES A POSITIVE RESPONSE?

The letter you receive may say something like: "Thank you for your thoughtful letter. I agree with you that (fill in the blank)."

But there are different levels of agreement. If the legislator doesn't explicitly state he/she is a cosponsor of the legislation you support, follow up with a return letter:

> "I appreciate your stated support for _____. However, your letter failed to indicate that you are a cosponsor of the necessary legislation (H.R. XXX or S. YYY). It is important to me that you sign on as a cosponsor of that bill, and I look forward to your favorable reply."

THREE: THE WISHY-WASHY NON-ANSWER:

If the officeholder hasn't taken a position, you may get one of these answers: "This bill is presently pending in the _____ Committee. If it comes before the full (House/Senate), I'll keep your thoughtful comments in mind." Or, "The senator/representative has a policy that he doesn't cosponsor bills."

The first response is deliberately vague. The second is a cop-out. Virtually every legislator cosponsors some bills. After all, his or her job is to represent his constituents' interests. The key is to make it obvious when an issue is important to those constituents.

FOUR: DON'T TAKE BALONEY FOR AN ANSWER:

First, write again. Tell the legislator you appreciate the response, but it didn't answer your question. Provide more information, if available. If you belong to an organization working on an issue, you can often get fact sheets or other material from that. Ask again for the legislator's position and urge him/her once more to cosponsor the legislation.

FIVE: OR, SMILE 'N DIAL:

Or you can call the Capitol (202-224-3121) and they'll connect you with the delinquent office. Ask the receptionist, "Could you tell me who handles legislation about [your topic]?"

Generally, in a congressional office the Administrative Assistant (AA) is the chief of staff. Legislative Assistants (LAs) do research, draft speeches and advise on legislation. Legislative Correspondents (LCs) just draft letters to folks like you. Talk to the Legislative Assistant, if you can. That's who advises your elected official and tells the LCs what to write. If you get a "her line is busy," "he's in a meeting," or "she's on the Floor with the Senator," leave a message describing your concern. Good staffers will call you back.

SIX: NO CALLBACK? CRACK THE WHIP:

If you get no call in 24 hours, call once more. Still no luck? Ask for the Administrative Assistant/Chief of Staff (the "A.A." is supposed to keep the staff from ignoring voters). The A.A. is often up to his/her ears, but you can leave a message: "I tried both Monday and Tuesday to reach your legislative assistant, Jane A. I'm very concerned I haven't had a return call and would like to speak to you or the Senator/Representative about my concerns." Chances are, you'll get a prompt, apologetic response.

SEVEN: YOU'RE ALL SWEETNESS AND LIGHT:

It's best not to be indignant, but to be apologetic yourself: "I'm sorry to bother you, but I just feel so strongly, and I hope you can help me out." Or, "I was worried you weren't getting my messages, and I know how busy you must be." Remember, you'll get more results with honey than vinegar.

Once you get the L.A., you want more than a statement of general support. To get the legislator really on record, he or she should cosponsor the bill you support.

EIGHT: PERSISTENT DIALOGUE:

YOU: Let me be sure I've got your name right. Is it Jane, J-A-N-E? And your last name? [get the name for your next call, or for sending information.]

JANE: Yes, that's right. What can I do for you today?

YOU: I wrote Senator Blank on May first, and the letter I received, dated, May 15th, really only told me the status of the bill, not his position on it.

JANE: I'm not familiar with it, could I look it up and perhaps get back to you?

YOU: That won't be necessary, I'll just read a paragraph to you. (Read the guts.)

JANE: Oh, I see. Well, I think the Senator has not taken a position on that yet.

YOU: I'm hoping to convince him to take one (and HERE is the time for a short, sweet sermon). You know, many people like me think: (facts A, B, and C). What do you think we can do to get him to cosponsor this bill? Do you think he needs more information? Would more letters help him/her decide?

JANE: If you have added information, I would be glad to bring it to his/her attention. Or, if added letters come in, I'll be sure to bring them to him/her.

If her boss is really uncommitted, this may push him/her to make a decision, and the easiest justification for a position is "the heat I'm getting from home."

If Jane cuts you off, you should become the nicest, most courteous, pain in the side that ever was. Call back in two weeks. Ask Jane about the mail. Ask when this is coming up.

Put yourself in her shoes. Do you want to have to talk to this person every Thursday? If the only thing

that's going to get rid of you is to cosponsor a bill that her boss might wind up voting for anyway, then why not just get him to cosponsor the bill?

NINE: STONEWALLED BY THE STAFF:

If you get no response from the staff, go higher. Every legislator visits his/her state or district often. Perhaps you can schedule a personal appointment at an office near you. If not, find out when there will be a public appearance at a Rotary, Kiwanis, town meeting or other function where you can exchange views. If at that meeting, the official disagrees, you can ask, "If we provide information that shows your position might not be as factual as you have been told, would you consider supporting us?" Public officials can't say "no" to that.

TEN: A MEETING IN HIS/HER OFFICE:

If you can get an appointment with your Representative/Senator, it helps to bring a one-page memo outlining your views, or a copy of your letter(s) to leave. If you belong to an organization working on this issue, call its headquarters and request fact sheets/reference material. They'll want to help you be the best lobbyist you can be during that meeting.

Take a knowledgeable friend or two to show more constituent support. Be sure to thank the legislator for his/her time. Keep the spiel short and sweet. Ask if and how you can help the official move in your direction. Ask if more letters help? Ask if you could meet with him/her again in a month or so. That'll let him know you're not going to go away.

ELEVEN: WHO'LL GET GROUND DOWN FIRST? :

Don't get discouraged. Inquiry volume counts, and persistence pays off. Legislators don't ignore issues that generate lots of mail and calls.

YOU: Well, Jane, would you be able to talk to the Representative/Senator about this in the coming days? Perhaps a decision can be made.

JANE: I do expect to talk to him/her, and I'll mention our conversation.

YOU: I'd appreciate it. Could you give me a call next week or should I call you?

JANE: I'll try to call, and if I don't, please feel free to call me.

Newton's first law of motion -- an object at rest tends to remain at rest -- applies to public policy. Things won't change on their own. It takes many individual contributions to tip the great scales of public affairs in the right direction.

If you follow just half of these instructions, your input will be more sophisticated than 97% of the contacts Congressmen receive. If you follow up on your letter, you're in the top one percent of all voters. Few people get active, so they are the ones who do really count. It's true -- the squeakiest wheels really do get the grease.

* Before you even write that first letter, you might follow a couple easy rules: (a.) The more personalized the letter, the greater the consideration given – this includes clear, handwritten letters; (b.) Talk about only one issue in a given letter; (c.) Threats like “do this or I’ll not vote for you,” or insults like “you’ve got to be stupid not to understand this,” destroy your credibility; (d.) Include an action item like “vote for H.R. 2345,” or “cosponsor S. 678;” (e.) As for a specific response like, “and if you can’t, please let me know your reasons for not doing so.”

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