

◆ Communicating with Congress

Writing about the topic "Communicating with Congress" is difficult because the points that need to be made are complex. Nevertheless, the space limitation imposed on me requires that I compress some important concepts into a few words. My brevity may be sufficient for some individuals; others may feel unfulfilled. The latter group is encouraged to review the recommended readings found as references at the end of this piece. To the former group, I caution you to be careful. You are likely to make mistakes if you are careless in your contacts with Congress.

Why Communicate with Congress?

There are 5 reasons why individuals and institutions interested in science would want to communicate with members of Congress:

- Provide scientific information;
- Interpret scientific facts;
- Advocate for science;
- Obtain or preserve programmatic resources; and
- Influence policy, laws, and regulations impacting science.

In a democracy, giving voice to facts, interests, positions, priorities, needs, and expected benefits is an accepted practice. In fact, for the scientific establishment, some say there has been too little communication with elected representatives (1). This is now likely to change with the Congressional budget decisions expected as a result of the pledged political attention to the federal deficit. Science must be "at the table" when these budget decisions are made.

Communicating with elected representatives is not in and of itself "lobbying" (2), but more a form of education. This line of distinction is, however, growing obscure with the passage of the Federal Lobbying Disclosure Act (effective 1 January 1996). The distinction is usually one of political-pressure tactics versus a solidly based educational approach, which is not usually considered lobbying. If you are not positive of your status, check with your institution to ensure that you are not crossing over the line as an

unregistered lobbyist. It is an excellent idea to coordinate all of your contacts with Congress with your institution's leadership. Why? It is very unlikely that a member of Congress will pass anything favorable for your institution without first checking with the office of your institution's president. And institutional presidents hate surprises.

Some factors that influence the legislative decision-making processes are the quality of the information provided; the effectiveness of the arguments advanced; the organization's mass, energy, resources, and links to other organizations; and the vision and shrewdness of the organization's leaders. Speaking as a representative of an institution, a trade group, professional society, or special-interest group holds more sway than just speaking for yourself.

It is also important to have the support of the press. Elected representatives are often moved to action by what is reported in the popular press, especially if it fits with their political philosophy. If you can organize a "well-placed" article in support of your position, so much the better. Negative press for your position or issue can be a political disaster.

How to Communicate

There are several ways to communicate with elected members of Congress: telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, face-to-face meeting, and formal hearings.

Whatever the circumstances, you should always be friendly, polite, reasonable, and appreciative of the opportunity to visit when communicating with members of Congress or their staffs. Never threaten or demand. These considerations are, of course, common professional courtesies that are all too often forgotten by otherwise nice people.

Successful communication with members of Congress can be attributed to attitude, awareness, approach, and attention (to details). Get these 4 things right and the rest is, as they say, easy. Before exploring these points, here are 2 important facts to remember.

- In most instances you will be dealing with a Congressional staff person, not an elected representative. That is good news, if

you have connected with the right person. Congressional staff members have enormous responsibilities and direct access to the member. Remember also that they make heavy-duty recommendations to their members. Do your homework well. Find out which staff member is responsible for the area of your interest, and take the time to learn the correct staff titles.

- In all manner of communicating with members of Congress or their staff, your time will be very limited, so be well prepared. It may sound dumb, but your presentation should be rehearsed, and you should know your lines. Try to capture your points in a few words. And, be prepared to have your scheduled 10-minute meeting cut at the last moment to 1 or 2 minutes. To deal with this eventuality, have a very short summary presentation. Like a good Boy Scout—be prepared.

Attitude

Your attitude when communicating with members of Congress and their staff must always be positive. Remember, you are not after an entitlement; you are seeking their support. They owe you nothing.

American democracy is not a meritocracy. It is a representative form of government. This means that political decisions are based on the needs of the representative's constituents, not the merits of science or the needs of public institutions.

Additionally, you must be appreciative and never patronizing. Some scientists can be a little overbearing when they are thrust into a political arena. Perhaps this is an expression of their nervousness or a consequence of situational uncertainty. You must guard against giving the appearance of being patronizing, as this attitude, even if just perceived, can be a turnoff with politicians.

Awareness

You will need to study the specific interests of the elected representatives and understand their party's position relative to the issues. You will also need to study any opponent's positions and be prepared to be persuasive

when confronted with those views.

You will need to know the correct terminology, such as the differences of the terms “budget”, “authorization”, and “appropriation”. You will also need to know the various committee assignments and how they match with your interest area.

You will need to appreciate the art of “deal making”, as practiced in a political atmosphere. Learn how and when decisions are made. Be prepared to show deference to the political process and to the participants. If politics “turns you off”, don’t attempt to change Congress. Get out of the picture and let someone else speak for you.

The most important point in communicating with Congress is to learn to listen—to the members and their staff.

Approach

Your approach is very important when communicating with members of Congress or with their staffs. What are the elected representatives looking for? Try to gain their perspective. Try to identify the issues that are important to their constituents. Ask yourself, what needs to be done for them? Is what you are proposing a priority for them?

When visiting an elected member of Congress, preferably carry good news or be able to offer a solution to a problem of importance to his or her constituents. You may also be able to offer advice or support for his or her position. Avoid arriving with a request when, from the perspective of the member, it is “out of the blue”. It is bad form to arrive with bad news or with criticism.

Approaches to members of Congress and their staffs can be made directly by institutional managers or scientists; indirectly by lay leaders, associations, and trade groups; and by special-interest groups. You should carefully consider a strategy that blends the best combination of interest groups and draws on their strengths to tell the story.

To communicate successfully with Congress, you will need to gather a lot of information and sift it into a manageable story. You must be very organized and focused. Many successful individuals use checklists to

be sure that no consideration is omitted. Always be honest in presenting the facts, and never have a “hidden agenda”.

Attention (to Details)

When writing to members of Congress (whether it is a letter, fax, or an e-mail), address your correspondence properly (for example, The Honorable John Doe). When sending a letter, always send the original; never send a copy. State up front your reasons for writing, and if a particular bill is the issue you wish to address, identify it by its H.B. (House Bill) or S.B. (Senate Bill) number. Of course, you should always sign the letter and include your complete return address.

When you want to meet with a member of Congress or one of the staff, make a formal appointment, and at the time of making the request, identify the topic(s) of interest. Limit your agenda to a maximum of 3 items. Have ready your specific recommended solutions. In the process of communicating with Congress, you should make the member’s constituency your frame of reference.

As noted above, when you are visiting with a member or one of the staff, you should have a shorter fall-back version ready. Also, plan on leaving a “1-pager” summary of your major points, and include on the 1-pager your points of contact (address, phone numbers).

Do not be late for your appointment or seem disappointed when they arrive late. Do not overstay your welcome. Do not try to solve all problems.

Offer to provide more information as a follow-up to your meeting, if this seems appropriate. And, by all means, after the meeting, promptly send a letter expressing your gratitude for their time and include any promised information.

When invited to address a Congressional hearing, be very well prepared. Inquire about other witnesses. Arrive early and plan to stay the entire time of the hearing. Speak clearly and try to convey your message(s) with excitement, enthusiasm, and liveliness. Don’t read your text.

In your presentation, don’t try to be too

technical. Stay away from jargon. Forget the gimmicks and jokes. Don’t try to use audio-visual equipment. Don’t go off on tangents; stick to the point.

Final Note

Those most successful in communicating with elected representatives work at it year round. They actively communicate when times are more leisurely. When a legislative crunch period comes around, they have already done their jobs while others struggle to be heard. They also carefully culture their elected representatives because they know, as I Ching said:

If one is brusque in his manner, others will not cooperate. If one is agitated in his words, they will awaken no echo in others. If he asks for something without first having established a relationship, it will not be given to him.

This is a nice thought for many situations, including communicating with Congress. ☸

David R MacKenzie

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Endnotes

1. Richard Stuckey, executive vice president of the Council for Agricultural Sciences and Technology, previously wrote of the taciturn scientist (that is, the scientist temperamentally disinclined to talk). The point Stuckey made was on the need to have the scientific community open up and more directly engage elected officials in discussion. There is, as he sees it, a need to communicate science’s successes and spell out the resources needed to continue doing important work. (See “The Taciturn Scientists: An Endangered Species” in the *American Phytopathological Society Newsletter*, February 1996.)

2. The term “lobbying” is said to have emerged during the presidency of Abraham

DIALOGUE

Lincoln, when “lobbyists” waited in the Willard Hotel to press their special interests on the President as he passed through the lobby.

Additional Reading

Wells WG. Working with Congress: a prac-

tical guide for scientists and engineers. Washington: American Assoc for the Advancement of Science; 1992.

MacKenzie DR. Principles of agricultural research. In: Principles of agricultural research management. Lanham (MD): Uni-

versity Press of America; 1996; p 213-24.

Boyle PG. Building Political Support for Extension in the 21st Century. (Manuscript is available from MASULGC at One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 710, Washington DC 20036-1191.)