

Citizen Advocacy 101

Excerpted from Citizens in Action: How to Influence Government

Five Key Elements of Effective Messages

As you work to develop your messages, know that in addition to being personal, truly effective messages contain the following elements:

- **Relevancy:** Effective messages demonstrate their relevancy to the policymaker in two ways. First, they highlight the impact on those who the official represents by commenting on the impact of a particular policy position on people in the district. Second, they seek to connect the policy issue at hand to an issue or series of issues that the policymaker has expressed interest on in the past.
- **Specific:** Effective messages are also very specific about what the policymaker can do to help solve a problem. This is essentially the “ask.” It may be a policy-related ask, such as “will you cosponsor this bill” or a relationship-building ask, such as “will you visit us in the district?”
- **Truthful:** Being absolutely sure of any facts you relay is vital. Policymakers often rely on the expertise of others to help them understand the ramifications of particular policy proposals. If you provide information to an official’s office with specifics about how a particular policy will affect you, your business, or your community, you’re likely to be taken at your word. If your facts are wrong, you may regret not double-checking them. Of course, it is always OK to be unsure of the implications. If you’re asked a question you don’t know the answer to, the best thing to say is “I don’t know, but I’ll get back to you” – and then get back to them!
- **Positive:** Effective messages are “positive” in two ways. First, they focus on the positive steps that can be taken to solve a problem. In other words, they focus on the benefits that a particular action will bring to the community. Second, positive messages stay away from referring to government as “evil” or “wasteful.” Even if you think an official has proposed the stupidest and most blatantly wrong-headed policy you’ve ever encountered, remember that in communicating with policymakers, you’re talking to someone who is part of the government. Referring to them as “evil” probably won’t get them on your side.
- **Brief:** Perhaps most important, effective messages are brief! In some cases, you may have only five minutes, or one paragraph, to get your message across. Use the time as wisely as possible to relay your key concerns – and what the policymaker can do to help!

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