

The Art and Science of the BFF:

105 Ways to Make
Friends on The Hill, at
the State House and in
City Hall

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Introduction: How to Use This Booklet

Fair or unfair, certain voters get more attention from elected officials than others. Lawmakers, being human, prefer listening to and working with certain people, just as you and I do. In fact, they're more attuned to the significance of relationships than most of us because they have to constantly win over people to keep their jobs.

However, many well-meaning grassroots volunteers believe they can suddenly build a working relationship with their elected officials when they need a favor, especially a vote on an issue that's important to them.

This belief is incredibly off base.

Experience says building a relationship with your lawmaker is not:

- making a campaign contribution
- attending a legislative reception
- attending an annual lobby day event
- attending a legislator's fundraiser
- following a legislator on Twitter
- "liking" a legislator's Facebook page

There's nothing wrong with any of these activities. In fact, I include several of them as excellent ways to help cement your relationships with legislators.

However, these activities don't build instant relationships and trust. I know from teaching grassroots influencers how to get legislators on their side that people still believe doing these things builds trusting relationships.

But how do you feel when someone contacts you only when he or she needs a favor? Chances are you don't feel all that receptive and cooperative—and lawmakers are no different. Plus they're inundated with a plethora of "expert" information sources, requests, and recommendations for action. They prefer to work with people they know and trust to accurately filter and assess information coming their way.

This booklet provides ideas on how you can become a person of trust by increasing both your visibility and credibility with your elected officials. These ideas have been divided into five networking methods, including:

- legislative
- campaign
- publicity
- general networking
- legislative staff communications (for those in states where legislators have full-time staff)

In addition, they're listed in order from "low engagement" activities (such as social media tips) to "high engagement" communications.

Do Your Homework

Before you jump in to implement your relationship-building strategy, complete these homework assignments:

1 Learn about your legislator. Research information by googling his or her name and title (for example, Senator John Doe, Representative Susan Jones, etc.). Bookmark your legislator's website.

2 Subscribe to a Google alert service and insert your lawmaker's full name and title into the alert so you'll receive an email alerting you to news stories about your elected official.

3 Bookmark www.votesmart.org and enter your lawmaker's name on that site to track his or her votes on key issues.

Legislator Publicity

For legislators to leave a legacy, they must be re-elected. One of the keys to re-election is making sure their constituents know about their achievements through publicity. Therefore, they value people who facilitate positive publicity, regardless of the avenue.

9 Write a letter or email to the editor of your local paper commending your lawmaker for actions on a particular piece of legislation or responsiveness to a constituent inquiry.

10 Post your comments on your local media's online portals (including blogs authored by local political reporters) commending your lawmaker for actions on a particular piece of legislation.

11 Encourage your Twitter followers to follow your lawmaker on Twitter by using the #FF hashtag and your lawmaker's Twitter handle. For example: "For those in our community who want to keep up on what our congressman is doing in Washington, #FF @repjohndoe."

12 Post your comments on social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) acknowledging your lawmaker for actions taken.

13 Speak of your legislator favorably to friends and colleagues, online (Facebook, Twitter), and especially offline. An abundance of research shows people form their views about candidates based on input from trusted friends and colleagues.

Legislative Activities

While you probably have one or two public policy issues you're actively monitoring, your legislator deals with hundreds every year. If you're aware and supportive of his or her other legislative goals, you'll stand out in the crowd.

30 Write a note recognizing your lawmaker's efforts when you discover a legislative initiative the individual actively championed has failed. It's common for elected officials to receive words of congratulations when they help pass major legislation; they're more likely to favorably remember those who encourage them when they fall short of their goals.

32 Offer to contribute information on one of your areas of expertise for your legislator's upcoming column, blog, etc. Most legislators write regular updates and always need material. You may have a story or example that makes the person's point more compelling.

Other Opportunities for Keeping in Touch

The key to building a relationship is how you interact when you don't need something from your legislator. Lawmakers know the difference between people who contact them only when they need something (whether a vote or a favor) and those who keep in touch to offer helpful information or encouragement.

40 **Tell your legislator, “Thanks** for doing a good job” whenever you see him or her, whether at a public function, at the fitness center, or a local restaurant. One legislator told me, “Those kinds of comments, though brief, had a lasting impact. They kept me going.”

61 **Always inform your legislator** when you become aware of newly appointed community leaders. Elected officials want and need to know who the opinion leaders are in their communities—from the YMCA to the Chamber of Commerce. For maximum value, provide this information before it's publicly known.

63 **Ask your legislator** if he or she would like to be considered as a board member of a local, state, or national non-profit organization of which you're a member. All legislators want to serve their community, state, and country and leave a legacy. Serving in a leadership role helps them achieve this.

Campaign Volunteer Activities

Research conducted with lawmakers countrywide revealed they consider campaign volunteers to be one of the most influential types of constituents, ranking only behind family members and personal friends. Campaign volunteers invest in the lawmaker's career, and legislators don't forget who helped them get elected.

70 **As you volunteer, tweet your activities** to your friends. Be sure to use the campaign hashtag and the candidate's Twitter handle.

71 **Offer to write a blog post** about the campaign from a volunteer's perspective.

73 **Write an endorsement email** to your friends and colleagues urging them to vote for your candidate. Make sure it's written on your personal stationery or from your personal email address. Send a copy of the correspondence to your legislator.

74 **Post comments** on your Facebook page supporting your lawmaker.

87 **Hold a “meet the candidate” event** in your home. Invite neighbors, friends, and colleagues. This gives your candidate more exposure to potential voters and comes with your tacit endorsement—a powerful combination for any candidate.

88 **Volunteer to make phone calls** urging people to vote for your legislator. Phone banks are usually part of an organized campaign, but you can also call your family, friends, and co-workers. Keep a list of people you contacted and inform the campaign staff.

Legislative Staff

Because staff members play a critical role in facilitating the distribution of information and access to the lawmaker, they merit special attention. In fact, many leading interest groups place the same emphasis on building relationships with staff as they do with legislators. The ways to keep in touch with lawmakers are the same for staff. So be sure to do your homework and then use the various networking techniques.

97 **Follow staff members' tweets** on Twitter.

98 **"Like" the staff's Facebook** page.

99 **Write a note of well-wishes** to staff members at the start of each legislative session. To all but the savviest voters, they are the forgotten link as the legislator serves the district. Staff members will remember your encouragement.