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Voices

Reading Between the Research Lines: Activities that Influence Congress and Congressional Staff from the 2017 Congressional Communications Report



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Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government

relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

As a self-proclaimed “research rat” I find it intriguing to read *between* the research lines to discern possible applications for government relations professionals. The third iteration of Dr. David Rehr’s [Congressional Communications Report](#) gives us insights that reinforce scientific influence principles that may not be maximized by many well-meaning advocacy groups. Readers of the research may think, “Of course, I know this, it makes sense,” but the ever-present challenge is having the resolve to do what makes sense. Other research, as well as our [Grassroots Influence Pulse \(GRIP®\)](#) findings have shown that there is still a disconnect between how most advocacy leaders spend their time and what is deemed by their influence prospect, Congressional staff and Members of Congress, as the most efficacious ways to communicate.

This research is relevant because there are several pertinent findings not explored in other Congressional communications research projects. It doesn’t attempt to present an unblemished picture of Congressional staff, Congress, or lobbyists.

The research asked questions of professional lobbyists and Congressional staff. I will focus my insights on the responses of Congressional staff and the applications for grassroots advocates and their leaders. This is descriptive v. inferential research, so we can’t draw conclusions on which communications tactics resonate with Congressional staff who did *not* take the survey. However, it does offer valuable snapshots of the most utilized and preferred communications methods. The research is voluminous, so I’m sharing applications from select conclusions in this column, and will provide more in Part Two of this post.

Shaping Congressional Staff Decision-Making

The researchers asked Hill staff to cite the most effective lobbying activities in shaping Congressional staff decision making on legislative issues. They are, in order (with my editorial comments):

Be Someone I Can Count On

1. Providing Consistently Reliable Information - "Consistently" is the operative word. Consistent behaviors compound and give your organization the benefit of the doubt.

Get Out of Facebook and into Their Face

2. Holding Face to Face Meetings - Face to face engagement is the platinum standard of influence. There are around six major advantages of face to face interactions that simply cannot be duplicated in other mediums.

Get to the Point & Be the Devil's Advocate (tied)

3. Presenting a Concise Argument - I believe this rose to the top because legislative staff are frequently harried and distracted. Concise communications makes their lives easier.

Presenting Refuting and Opposing Views - Presenting opposing views is a major element of credibility, and it demonstrates a higher level of advocacy sophistication. Your audience knows you have done your homework and aren't memorizing the dreaded "talking points."

New for 2017 - Use the Friends and Family Plan

4. Bringing in Constituent Supporters - This insight is new to the 2017 research. Despite some group's desperate wish to the contrary, not all constituents are equal. With my eye on the meeting room exits, I have gingerly reminded my audiences of this for the last 19 years (while also sharing how to exploit their strengths to be someone lawmakers want to meet). What is fascinating about this research is that not only did the respondents admit that the constituent totem pole is a reality, but it has calcified into not just local opinion leaders, but local *supporters*. That's not a minor distinction. Again, this isn't something you'll read in air-brushed research.

It's also not great news for organizations that don't have a mechanism to find,

recruit and train the supporters of key legislators. When Dr. Rehr spoke to my Innovate to Moitvate[®] conference attendees, he interpreted this as a manifestation of the extreme polarization on Capitol Hill. Everything is monitored, possibly recorded, and transmitted on social media, which leads to guarded interactions. He believes another reason for this attitude is that many lawmakers don't want their supporters to find out they are meeting with an opposition group member.

It's also a vivid example of a dearth of Congressional courage and leadership. It's easy to meet with people who agree with you. Great leaders aren't afraid to engage with those who disagree.

New for 2017 - Do My Work

5. Providing Legislative Language - Translation: Do the work for Congressional staff and their Member of Congress. This is another new finding, and not one you'll see in other studies, probably because it doesn't necessarily reflect positively on lawmakers or their staff. "Insiders" have known of this dynamic forever, and many organizations justifiably want to provide legislative language. It's a sign that the legislative staff trusts the organization to provide expert information. However, we now know that providing this does shape their behavior.

What NOT To Do

What's the bottom line? What should you now do to be more effective? Let's invert the findings. Let's look at what *not* to do. Based on this research, if you were to ask your government relations team, "What could we do to **reduce** our ability to shape legislative staff decision making?" You would:

Provide reliable information only when convenient for your organization.

Spend more time encouraging your advocates to communicate online v. in person with lawmakers.

Go into detail when sharing your legislative issue positions, preferably with lots

of irrelevant details.

Coach your advocates to tell one side of the story - yours.

Use the AWB approach to advocacy - recruit "any warm body" to meet with lawmakers, and bonus points for arranging for constituent adversaries to meet with lawmakers.

Keep your best information to yourself; don't share solutions, only problems with legislators.

The bottom line. What is your team doing? Are you doing what works, or what you find interesting? Being "busy" doesn't equal being effective.

In part two of my column, I'll share how to apply the research findings on the preferred sources of information for Congressional staff. Hint: it's not what you love and adore.



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