

Open the Right Doors by Finding

# YOUR KEY CONTACTS

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**K**ey Contact programs begin with great fanfare, hope and expectations. Properly executed, they are one of the most efficacious ways to impact the political process.

However, many Key Contact programs are simply faceless names in a database. How can something so right turn out so wrong? I believe that 90 percent of our results (or lack of them) are embedded in the execution of our Key Contact programs.

The following are some of the “worst practices” that result in wailing and gnashing of teeth for government relations professionals, and lack of program momentum. I don’t have the space to list all of them, but here are a few.

#### **Assuming that Organizational Title = Commitment**

This approach is so off base, it’s not even wrong. It’s a variation on drive-through grassroots recruitment. Now, please do not send me flaming emails accusing me of blaspheming your program. I’m not stating that just because someone is a plant manager or a senior vice president, they cannot be a Key Contact. What I am saying is that it is fine

to approach the “titled class,” but we have to ask them to serve, not appoint them to serve.

You may be interested to know that in my interviews with *Fortune* magazine’s “Power 25” lobbying organizations, I learned that virtually none of them appoint people to serve as Key Contacts. As one vice president of government affairs told me, “They have to have the ability to work with their legislator and be articulate. We won’t take just anyone into the program, regardless of who they are.”

The rush in the 1990s for many organizations to appoint people to serve as Key Contacts reminds me of Emile Chartier’s observation, “Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it’s the only one we have.” Assigning people to serve as Key Contacts based on their title has several negative effects. Here are a few:

- **Less Key Contact buy-in**, which results in less motivation to communicate with legislators.
- **Legislator skepticism.** Lawmakers are fully aware that organizations employ these tactics, and may view with less credibility people who have been “assigned” to contact them, rather than the “regular citizen” that they love

to hear from. (If you doubt this, my research with state legislators revealed that legislators view groups with “regular citizens to advocate for them” as highly effective.)


- **Lack of quality control.** We all know of high-ranking organization members who become chemically incapable of making a phone call or conducting a meeting as soon as they know an elected official is their audience. Further, there are those who, rather than leaving a mark with elected officials, are apt to leave a stain in their memory.

#### **Obscure Expectations**

Another common lapse in effective execution is failing to articulate clear volunteer expectations and benefits of their involvement. Key Contacts are volunteers. We must be able to quickly articulate to a potential Key Contact the expectations, benefits and results of their involvement. We all have had paying jobs that reeked of indistinct expectations. We cannot afford to be indistinct with our varsity-team volunteers, or they will check out.

Have you ever volunteered for a

# Maximize Training for Key Contacts



Grassroots training should be an ongoing process, not one that is over when the trainer leaves. There are services a grassroots trainer should provide before, during and after your training so that you can maximize the benefits of the training. You should never accept “hit and run” or “off-the-shelf” training. However, that subject is another article!

You as a grassroots professional can enhance the long-term benefits of your training. Remember, the goal is not just increased knowledge, but improved performance via increased legislative, civic and political activism.

Traditionally, with the “hit and run” training approach, trainees are not adequately prepared for the new knowledge and skills and thus, there is not much behavioral change. You’ll get the desired results with a long-term process of staff preparation, participation and performance support.

#### **Preparation**

Several weeks before the training, communicate to your participants the clear link between what they will learn and how it impacts your cause. But be careful — when we over-hype the benefits of faxes and email communications, we send an inconsistent message.

If I as a grassroots volunteer am hearing that sending an email or making a phone call is all I need to do to get my lawmaker’s attention, I probably won’t see the value in Key Contact training. (I believe this message is why groups across the country are seeing a downturn in the number of participants at their annual Lobby Day events.)

Establish clear learning and performance objectives; tell them what they are expected to do differently after the training.

If it’s a relatively small training class, call each trainee to show that you value their participation. The great communicators make their messages as personal as possible!

responsible position in an organization only to discover that there are no expectations and guidelines for your involvement? It's about as pleasant as spending an afternoon at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, isn't it? Unclear expectations result in unenthusiastic and inconsistent Key Contact performance.

### **No Accountability**

When we do not follow up with our Key Contacts to find out how they are communicating with elected officials, our silence is an enabler. It implies very clearly and neatly that the Key Contact role is not important. This "knowledge blockage" also impedes our progress because we miss vital information when planning our overall grassroots strategy. Do not worry that you are nagging them; nagging demonstrates that what they are doing is important and vital to the organization.

Depending on the size of your Key Contact network, there are a variety of ways to elicit the desired information. And no, your organization isn't "too big" to gather the information. I know of several national organizations that take the time to personally meet with their Key Contacts,

and one of my clients sets aside time every other week, and after every fundraiser, to call each of her Key Contacts.

### **Ask Yourself...**

What percent of your Key Contacts are appointed, and what percent have you asked to serve in this capacity?

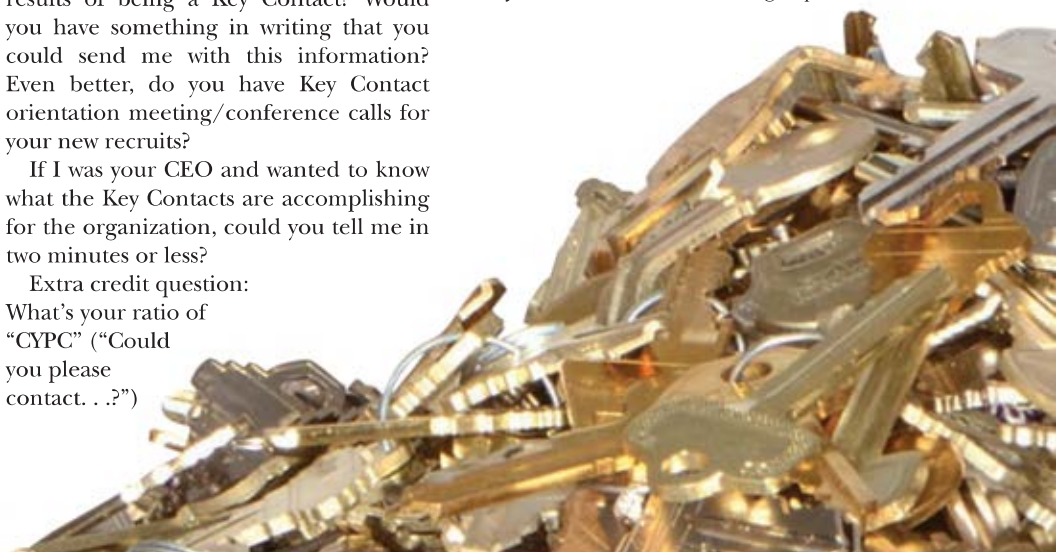
If I called your office and stated that I wanted to serve as a Key Contact, could you tell me the expectations, benefits and results of being a Key Contact? Would you have something in writing that you could send me with this information? Even better, do you have Key Contact orientation meeting/conference calls for your new recruits?

If I was your CEO and wanted to know what the Key Contacts are accomplishing for the organization, could you tell me in two minutes or less?

Extra credit question:  
What's your ratio of "CYPC" ("Could you please contact . . .?")

conversations with your Key Contacts to your "How is it going, how can I help you be even more effective?" conversations? **||**

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Ideally, your CEO should make opening remarks at the training, and attend the session as long as possible. If the CEO is unavailable, ask the highest-ranking senior company leader available to kick off the training session. This makes an impact on your Key Contacts, as it demonstrates the importance of the grassroots program and its impact on the organization.

### **Participation**

Encourage practice in the workshop. By "practice" I mean application learning activities. You can't get fit by looking at the treadmill or weights; you have to use them. The same principle applies to any new communication skill, such as meeting with legislators. Your volunteers have to engage in the activity to build their capabilities. There are several communications exercises besides the tired "meeting with your legislator" role-play that build volunteer confidence and skills.

Make sure there are lots of opportunities for trainees to interact with each other during the training.

A shared experience creates confidence and a team atmosphere.

Create opportunities for analysis and action plans. Training without this is a performance, not a true learning session.

### **Performance**

Help your activists apply their new knowledge and skills by:

Providing clear accountability and incentives for improvement. In other words, they need to know, "What's in it for me?"

Providing positive feedback and encouragement.

Creating forums/meetings/reunions for them to share tips and success stories; and, Let them loose! Studies show that 70 percent of learning happens "on the job," in this case, when they are meeting with legislators!

### **Ongoing Development and Measurement**

I had someone say to me once that you "can't measure the effect of training." After I caught my breath, I gave him several suggestions.

Training outcomes can be measured, but with the business of relationship development (which is what good Key Contact training embodies), it is a long-term process.

Review their action plans and offer honest critiques. You can't complain if you don't tell them what's expected.

Since the Key Contact training should be the start or enhancement of their activism, establish a coaching function to regularly assess and coach your volunteers to higher levels of advocacy in the district. Action plans, practice exercises, etc. are some projects I recommend and conduct for clients.

Get feedback from your lobbyist and legislators regarding your Key Contacts' impact on your issues. There's nothing quite as motivating as hearing from the customer (the legislators) regarding if and how your people are impacting the process.

Is this more work? YES! Is quality training more likely to produce empowered, REAL Key Contacts? Most definitely. **||**

—Amy Showalter