

# What to Know Before You Go!

## Know How to Talk to Them

### Developing Your Message



**Personal  
messages  
matter!**

In this reading, we'll look at strategies for overall message development, regardless of what technique you'll use (such as phone calls, meetings or written communications) to deliver the message, specifically:

- Utilizing the results of your research
- The power of personalizing
- Five key elements of winning messages

#### *Utilizing the Results of Your Research*

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As you consider developing your winning message, think about how you can best utilize the results of the research you've conducted on your audience. For example:

- Because you know what policies the official cares about, you'll be able to talk about your issues in terms he or she understands and can relate to
- Because you know more about the official's personal background (where he or she went to school, for example), you can make connections based on non-policy related matters, such as personal hobbies or whether you graduated from the same school.
- Because you know more about the constituency he or she represents, you'll be able to make the issues more relevant by commenting on the direct and specific impacts on the people he or she represents.

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- ❑ Because you know whether the official has taken a position on your issues in the past, you can thank him or her for past support – or gently guide him or her, through your persuasive arguments, toward a better policy direction.

By demonstrating your understanding of the audience, and tailoring your messages accordingly, you'll have a far greater chance of being heard – and perhaps the official will even agree with you!

### *The Power of Personalizing*

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Every recent report about communicating with elected officials highlights the importance of relevant, thoughtful and, most important, personalized messages. The Congressional Management Foundation, for example, recently conducted a survey of Congressional staff asking what types of messages made an impression with them. One of the most important findings was that personalized communications are extremely powerful.

What does this mean for you? When it comes to meetings, be prepared to tell a personal story (you can use all the fun templates in this module. Explain through a short anecdote or story how the policy issue impacts you directly. Officials recognize the time it takes to personalize a message, and will focus their efforts on those communications. One way to develop your story is to use the "SPIT Technique."

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### The SPIT Technique



SPIT is an acronym as follows:

**S** = Specific: Be as specific as possible about what the leader can do. For example, “we would like you to cosponsor a bill” is better than “our practice provides valuable services”

**P** = Personal: Messages that are based on compelling stories have more of an impact. As noted above, think about why this matters to you, as well as specific people you have served. How did you help them? The overall community? This really helps you focus on the benefits you provide.

**I** = Informative: In addition to that personal story, you’ll want to have some valuable information to back it up. Some of the information you might want to gather (depending on your situation) includes:

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- Number of people impacted
- Number of people employed
- Specifics on programs provided
- Reach of your work
- Special materials / services provided that relate to the community

**T = Trustworthy:** Finally, your message should suggest that you are trustworthy and the best way to do that is to be clear you'll follow-up. This says to the person you're talking to that you are in this discussion for the long haul.

### *Five Key Elements of Effective Messages*

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

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to be taken at your word. 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. In fact, you're part of the government! Referring to government as evil simply perpetuates the negative cycle. Instead, focus on the actions that can be taken to ensure what you consider to be a good policy outcome.
- ❑ **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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