

Contacting Elected Officials

Learn How To Communicate With Your Elected Officials In Ways That Get Results!

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "There are only two powers in the world, the sword and the pen; and in the end the former is always conquered by the latter." Napoleon's axiom is well known. But in today's high-tech world, does it still ring true?

The editors of *Life* magazine think so. In the publication's September 29, 1997, issue they named the printing of the Gutenberg Bible in 1455 as the most important event of the last 1,000 years because it ushered in the information revolution.

TAKE UP YOUR...PENS!

The written word has always been a powerful tool, and thanks to a host of constitutionally protected freedoms, the power of the pen is even more potent in America today. Our nation's Constitution guarantees "freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to *petition the government for a redress of grievances*." While freedom of speech and press gets lots of attention, the right to petition the government is also a fundamental freedom.

Since God's providence has granted America these freedoms, Christian citizens have a responsibility to exercise their rights wisely. That means answering the call to "take up your pens" (or your keyboard) and communicate with elected officials, or planning a visit to speak with a representative—all without fear of reprisal or punishment.

TAKING THAT FIRST STEP

It can seem intimidating at first to contact elected officials, but there are many ways available for citizens to let their voice be heard.

For example, grass roots organizations often conduct mass media campaigns designed to rally their constituents to action. These campaigns often take the form of petitions, post-

cards or telegrams. While such mass-produced petitions are less effective than personal correspondence, remember that most elected officials tally every constituent communication that comes to the office. Getting the attention of elected officials is often a numbers game.

Most representatives personally read only a small sampling of the mail from constituents. The volume is just too much. Therefore a system is in place that responds to letters.

The mail goes to a low-ranking staff member. He figures out your issue, tallies your response, and sends back one of several form letters that addresses your inquiries. If your letter is general in nature, you will get a generic, printed letter in return.

LET'S GET PERSONAL

Bruce Barron, former congressional aide, offers some practical tips in his book, *Politics for the People*, to help concerned citizens get their views heard in the hallowed halls of our city, state, and federal capitals.

How do you get past the standard response? According to Barron, "A personal phone call or, better yet, a concise, individually written letter will carry more weight."

The key is to write letters that stand out—letters that are different, letters that demand a personal response. That kind of letter gets noticed and draws attention to your cause. Here are a few reasons why:

- 1) A personal letter shows that you care about the issue.
- 2) A personal letter demonstrates that you act independently.
- 3) A personal letter says you are willing to invest time to get an answer.

INCREASING YOUR IMPACT

Here are a few tips to help your letter make an even greater impact.

1) Ask very specific questions.

Make it your goal to ask questions so specific your elected official's staff cannot respond with a form letter. That forces the staff to provide clear answers.

2) **Offer a policy option.** Don't just express your disapproval or opposition; always list an alternative. Then ask the representative to address the implications of your alternate policy.

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TESTIMONY

Four Decades Of Letters Get Results!

If you are a politician from Southern California, most likely you have received a letter from Frank Drewe. This Glendale citizen, now retired, has been writing to elected officials and sending letters to the editor for 40 years!

"I've been a political activist all my life," he says. "I can remember my father telling me, shortly after World War II, about how the media was too easy on Stalin." It was right about then that Frank wrote his first letter to the editor.

After all these years, Frank has accumulated file drawers full of information and research. It has been from this remarkable database that he has drawn ammunition for a constant stream of letters (and now faxes).

"I'm on everybody's fax list and they are on mine," he states. That translates into about 10-15 faxes a day coming in and many hundreds going out. Some months his phone bill is close to \$200!

With his automatic fax machine all programmed, Frank said, "I just touch a couple or

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3) **Know the legislative process.** If you are vague about what they are doing, they can be vague in answering you. But if you ask your legislator to take specific action, he can't dodge your questions so easily.

4) **Keep up the dialogue.** If you get a response you don't like, call the congressman's district or federal office and politely but firmly ask for a complete answer.

This approach means you must "know your stuff" on the issue. You must be able to present it well and also be able to discern the elected official's response.

WOULD YOU HELP ME?

Another way of gaining a better audience to express your views is to get to know the staff member responsible for articulating the policy position for the elected official. Barron notes, "This approach is especially useful if you expect to communicate frequently on bills within a specific legislative area, such as education."

Though they have busy schedules, they often will be able to take the time to help you understand where a congressman stands on the issue in question. Plus, they may help you find persuasive arguments.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE LETTERS

1) **State your purpose right up front.** State it in the first paragraph of the letter. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it appropriately. (House bill -- H.R. ____ / Senate bill -- S. ____)

2) **Always be courteous.** The Bible tells us to respect others because

all men are made in the image of God, but also that we should "be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1).

3) **Address only one issue.** Avoid the temptation of using a "shotgun" approach with a letter that tackles all your hot-button issues. Instead, stay focused on one particular issue with each letter.

4) **Keep your letter to one page.** This is very important. A one-page letter speaks volumes to your ability to concisely and professionally communicate your point. If you need help keeping your letter to one page, ask a friend to edit it.

PLEASE SIT DOWN!

Of course, better than a letter or phone call to your elected official's office, you may want to make a personal visit. Every effort is made by the congressional staff to schedule meetings with constituents. That is a very effective way for you to convey a message about specific legislation.

To make the most of your personal visit with your elected official, here are some suggestions:

Plan your visit carefully. Be clear about your objectives. Know who you are going to meet with.

Make an appointment with the person in charge of the office schedule. This will help you get in touch with the right person so your issues are dealt with appropriately.

Be prompt and patient. It is not uncommon, due to last-minute changes in schedule, for a legislator to be late or have a meeting interrupted.

But you can show your seriousness and professional attitude by being there on time. Of course, be flexible if interruptions do occur. By being on time, you can be ready to meet when the opportunity is open.

Like the Boy Scout handbook states—be prepared! Have your information and materials ready to support your position. Have copies ready for the official or his or her staff. If they are not aware of the details, your information may help them understand your position.

Be political. Since elected officials first and foremost want to represent their constituents in their district or state, show how your issue connects with them. Show how you can assist in communicating this information to his constituents.

Be responsive. Answer any and all questions—and always be candid with your responses. Elected officials take seriously what their constituents say. Remember, to your elected official you represent the views of hundreds or perhaps thousands of people. But always speak *your* mind, not the opinion of "John Q. Public."

Follow up your meeting with a "thank you" letter. It is also appropriate to summarize the meeting and its main points. Include with your letter any additional information your elected official may have requested.

Communicating with elected officials is an important civic duty that can result in real changes that impact your community. So get started today!

NEED MORE HELP?

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three buttons, and I can send a letter to just about anyone or any group." That can be elected officials, newspaper and magazine editors, Christian leaders, political organizations, or individuals.

Has he seen any fruit from his labors? "I was real active in fighting against the 18 bills recently introduced by the California legislature promoting homosexual rights," Frank says. "We really concentrated on that. We defeated all of them."

Does he think some see him as a conservative wacko? "I get feedback, every once in awhile from someone who is angry," he states. "But it is not very often. As often as I write, I don't get much. Most people love what I say and that helps keep the fire going."

What does he think is the best piece of advice for someone writing a letter to a politician or an editor? "Try to keep the letters as short as you can," he concludes. "I try to keep them down to one page."