

TIPS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS

Implicit in the act of contacting your legislator is the desire to influence how he or she thinks. It is your right to talk with your legislator. Here is how to do it effectively.

1. Legislators are people. Talk to them as people; be friendly, sincere and honest.
2. Legislators are generalists. Due to the nature of the job, they know a little about a lot but may not know details about your profession, your issues, your area of expertise. Don't expect them to be versed in the topic you are bringing to them. Begin with an explanation of the general topic including necessary background, but be as succinct as possible.
3. Provide good information, give only facts. Legislators are influenced by facts. If the facts are on your side you will have a much better chance of accomplishing your goal.
4. Answer all questions directly; don't provide only half the story. If a legislator believes he or she has been deceived or misled, you will be working with an angry legislator. Angry legislators can and will be difficult for you to work with in the future.
5. Along the same lines, let the legislator know what the pitfalls might be of supporting you. **If they believe in the cause**, most legislators will take on or oppose special interest groups, even powerful interest groups. If they discover there is a mountain of opposition after agreeing to support a bill or a cause, they will feel deceived and that makes an angry legislator.
6. Recognize that there is probably a sound logical argument in opposition to you. There are other interest groups who believe and argue logically that what you want to do is not good for consumers, or is more costly, or bureaucratically messy, or bad in many other ways. Holding such views does not make your opponents bad people, it just makes them what you are, someone who is trying to further his or her financial and/or professional interests, or just trying to do the right thing from his or her perspective. Some legislators will disagree with your position. Treat them respectfully. They may be allies on other issues.
7. Ask specifically and directly for your legislator's support. Listening and nodding does not indicate agreement. Find out if you have convinced him or her of your position.
8. Legislators respond best to people from their own districts. If possible have someone from his or her district with you when you talk with a legislator.
9. Establish a relationship with your legislator. Distinguish yourself from others by calling or writing to your legislator and let them know when they have done something right. Don't approach them only when you want something. Everyone speaks up when they disagree; let your legislators know when you agree with them.