



Tips for Productive Legislative Visits

Don't drop in, make an appointment: It is more impressive to your legislative office when you are able to come to Washington, D.C. for a visit. But even if you can't come to D.C. meeting with the legislative office in your home district is still important. Call the district office and make an appointment.

You can find your Representative's local office here by going to your Representative's home page.

http://www.house.gov/house/MemberWWW_by_State.shtml

You can find your Senator's local office by going to your Senator's home page.

http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

Ask to speak with the appointment secretary and be prepared to tell him/her that you'd like to meet with your Representative to discuss the CAP Act (HR 3745).

(If you are meeting with your Senate offices, don't worry that currently there is no Senate version, ask if you can have an "informational meeting" regarding Public, Educational and Government access television).

The challenge of meeting with legislative aides. It is highly likely you will be meeting with a legislative aide and that poses a challenge. Most legislative aides are working on a variety of issues and may not be working on telecommunications issues at all. So be careful not to use "industry" language or terms they may not be familiar with, even terms such as "Right of Way." Ask them what town or city they live in, and if you are familiar with the channels in that area, ask them if they have ever seen the channel. Make sure they understand that you are not there on behalf of PBS (that confusion happens a lot). Frequently newer staff will appreciate any materials you may want to give them as it helps them explain your issue to the legislator.

Be brief. Be prepared to get only fifteen or so minutes with the legislator, staff or aide. Prepare in advance what you are going to say, if necessary take notes with you.

Know your legislator. Even if you have met your legislator before, do you really *know* how they vote on issues or what issues they are interested in? Go to their website, see what committees they serve on, find out what their interests are. Are they interested in veteran's issues? Do you have a show about veterans on your channel? Is their interest early childhood education? Do you have a show about that on your channel? Look up their voting record at Project Vote Smart <http://www.votesmart.org/>, see how they vote on "Technology and Communication." Look up their campaign finance record, did they receive money from telecommunications companies or the cable industry? That is not always an indication of how they are going to feel about the CAP Act, but it is information you should know.

Don't be afraid to ask someone who personally knows the legislator to come with you for the visit. Is there a producer in your center who knows the legislator? Is there someone at your Rotary or Kiwanis Club? How about your local League of Women Voters or Republican or Democratic Party? Having someone with you who personally knows the legislator can be very helpful.

Travel light. There are times when legislative offices on Capitol Hill will meet with a group of people (say 15-20). That is not advisable when meeting in the district office. If you are doing a group visit in the district office keep the number at no more than five. This prevents the legislator or staff from feeling overwhelmed or "ganged" up on. If you are working with a large group of people who all want to have a visit, break up the large group into smaller groups and conduct the visits separately.

Be punctual. As with most things in life, being late doesn't make a good impression. If you can't be on time, be early. If you can't make the meeting, don't cancel, do what you can to get someone you trust to go in your place.

Be polite, briefly introduce yourself. Always be polite (especially to the appointment secretary). Give a brief introduction of yourself and a brief one or two sentences as to why you are there.

Don't do all the talking. Nobody likes being in a "one-way" conversation. Ask questions, listen, find out what is on their mind. Don't interrupt even if what they are saying is something you completely disagree with, wait until they are done and then offer them "engaged feedback." *"I hear your concern that this bill might be a burden to the cable operators, but can I give you some examples of how that won't be the case?"* (By the way, never respond with "that's not true").

Be positive. Thank him or her for their support in the past, if there is no record of support for this issue, find out what other issues they have been supportive of and thank them for that. *"I saw that you voted to increase funding for diabetes research and I want to thank you for that, it's so important."* You might also add *"It just so happens that we have a show about diabetes that airs on our channel once a week."* (This is where the research is so important).

Make it personal. All politics is local as Tip O'Neill once said. Politics are local and they are personal. Explain why the CAP Act is a personal issue. Use examples from your center or from your show. Talk about the excellent work you do and how CAP will bring much needed relief. Tell stories that will be remembered. Stay away from broad sweeping examples, get specific.

Have your supporting materials ready. Be sure to have a copy or copies of the CAP Act with you, don't make them look it up. Have talking points. If you have petitions that have been signed or letters of support that have been written, have those with you. A promotional DVD from your channel (s) is critical, so bring that and a DVD player, so they can see your channel (s). Keep that promotional piece short, no more than two to three minutes.

Ask for a commitment or ask when you might be able to have a commitment. If you are meeting with an aide, you probably won't get a commitment at the meeting. Ask the aide when you should follow up for a commitment. If they aren't sure, ask if you can call them in one to two weeks as a follow up. Generally, unless your legislator sits on the committees that deal with telecommunications, they haven't seen the bill yet and probably won't give you a direct commitment. Ask your legislator when you can follow up for a commitment on the bill. Ask if there is any other information or materials you could provide to help them in their decision.

Thank them for their time. Here is another chance to invite them to your center or to invite them to be on your show.

Finally, the League of Women Voters offers the following excellent advice about what to do or not do.

What to do:

Address your Senator or Representative properly.

Identify yourself immediately at each contact. Public officials meet too many people to remember everyone.

Know the status of the legislation. Refer to a bill by number whenever possible.

Use your own words.

Be brief and explicit, courteous and reasonable.

Establish your own credentials or expertise on the subject of legislation under consideration.

Give legislators succinct, easy to read literature; highlight important facts and arguments. Their time is limited.

Call the chair or members of a committee holding hearings on legislation in which you are interested if you have facts that you think should influence his or her thinking.¹

Get to know legislative staff and treat them courteously. Their cooperation can make or break your chances to reach the legislators themselves.

Always keep off-the-record comments confidential.

Call to say you approve, not just to criticize or oppose.

In a letter include your address and sign your name legibly.

Keep the door open for further discussion in spite of any apparently negative attitudes.

What not to do.

Don't begin, "As a citizen and tax payer" (your elected representative assumes you are not an alien, and s/he knows we all pay taxes).

Don't apologize for taking his or her time. If you are brief and to the point s/he will be glad to hear from you.

Don't be arrogant, condescending or threatening toward legislators or their staff.

Don't argue or back recalcitrant legislators into a corner where they take a definite position against you.

Don't make notes of a conversation while talking to a legislator.