

CQAdvocacy

The Best Way to Approach Congressional Staffers

By Congressional Staffers

**ADVOCACY
& GROWTH**

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Let's face it. We're all selling something.



Just because you work for an organization you feel passionately about, and your title is government relations, executive director, or communications manager, you've still got to convince someone somewhere, that what you're saying, is the right way to go.

For all of us in this space, the most intimidating pitches you might ever have to make, happen to be to people who work in or around that great shining white building on the Hill.

They influence, research, craft and write legislation that could have a huge impact on your association, nonprofit or corporation. So, it goes without saying, building a relationship with the right Hill workers for your industry is key.

To do that, you'll need to dust off your charm offensive, get

your facts and figures in order, and have a plan to secure that meeting with the all-important staffer.

The good news is they already know that. And let's face it part of their job is to meet people just like you who have issues that need to be taken into consideration when legislation has to be fashioned.

But they're still human beings, and how you approach them – less lion stalking its prey on the Serengeti, and more warm, competent professional is a

good start – will go a long way to getting their buy-in in helping carry your issue over the finish line.

To get the inside scoop, we asked 11 individuals who have spent decades as staffers on the Hill getting approached about everything and anything – or who have had to spend their careers doing the approaching – for their best tips and tricks.

Here's what they said:

The Hill Insiders



Steven Taylor

Senior Vice President and
counsel for public policy at
United Way Worldwide

Spent 10 years working for four different Republican senators, including six years as counsel on the Senate Antitrust Subcommittee.

Favorite way to be approached: I always appreciated an advocate who was professional, transparent, and genuine. By that I mean that he or she was upfront, and they represented a point of view, and wanted to make the substantive case for that view. I was always willing to meet with someone who wasn't trying to pull the wool over my eyes.

Pet peeve: When I was a staffer, I had a one-strike and you're out rule. If you intentionally misled me, explicitly or implicitly, I would not trust anything you told me ever again.

Best/worst memory of an approach someone made to forward their issue or start a relationship? I was on a subcommittee that had jurisdiction over some business issues. During a meeting with a lobbyist for a tech company, he acted like he was being a whistleblower, discreetly sliding a piece of paper across the table to me, telling me there was 'some information' about one of his business' competitors that 'I'd want to know about.' He reaffirmed the already sleazy impression I had of him.

Best tip for approaching legislators on an issue? I think the two best things you can do when meeting with a Senator or member of Congress is to connect the dots between the issue and the state or district. And be sure your messaging about the issue relates to his or her view of the world.



Rob Hartwell

President of *Hartwell
Capitol Consulting*

Rob is a former chief of staff for Rep. Dick Schulze (R-PA) and legislative assistant for Rep. Mike Oxley (R-OH). He also worked briefly for three other members of Congress spanning a 12-year Capitol Hill career

Favorite way to be approached: By email, with a referral.

Pet peeve: When advocacy professionals call and keep calling, when it could be handled by email. It's hard for staffers to stay on the phone too long.

Best/worst memory of an approach someone made to forward their issue or start a relationship? When someone from the Democratic party not only got my name wrong, but should have known I'm a loyal Republican.

Best tip for approaching legislators on an issue? Get a close friend of whomever you're approaching as an ally, if you don't know the legislator that well, or relate your past experience in a manner they will appreciate. Good choices for allies might include subject matter experts, political supporters, or a person who sincerely wants to work with them.

The Hill Insiders (Continued)



Rodney Whitlock

Vice President of Health Policy for D.C.-based consulting firm *ML Strategies*

Prior to his current he worked as health policy director for Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and as a staff member for the late Congressman Charlie Norwood (R-GA)

Favorite way to be approached: I often used this line: "I know what I know, tell me something I don't know." To properly advise members of Congress, staffers need to understand the issues, and how they affect constituents. I always appreciated advocates who helped me better understand the issues and how actions taken by Congress affected their lives.

Pet peeve: Some folks arrive in Washington, D.C. having watched way too much Fox News or MSNBC. They make assumptions about the political beliefs of staff, and walk into meetings spoiling for confrontation. I always considered that an insult to my professionalism, and a missed opportunity for both of us.

Best/worst memory of an approach someone made: A lobbyist walked into a meeting, gave me a rather perfunctory greeting, then opened up a three ring binder to a tab and started reading. After a few minutes, I finally interrupted him and told him that I didn't handle energy issues. My schedule said he was here to talk about a specific healthcare issue. Without skipping a beat, he flipped to the next tab in his binder and started reading. It wasn't particularly effective, but I haven't forgotten it.

Best tip for approaching legislators on an issue: As an advocate, you have traveled all this way to speak to a member and their staff. It can't just be a 'one and done' effort. Build a relationship. Let them know you will stay in touch on the issues that matter to you. You really can make a difference.



Leslie Krigstein

Vice President of Congressional Affairs at the *College of Healthcare Information Management Executives*

Former legislative correspondent for Rep. Daniel Maffei (D-NY)

Favorite way to be approached: Have integrity and know your issue. A straightforward pitch that included relevance to my boss and the district was always the most successful. Understanding exactly how the issue or policy being discussed relates to the constituents back home was the most important part of any legislative meeting for me.

Pet peeve: When folks hadn't done their homework before a meeting. Knowing my boss' position, or the composition of the district, was important, and even if folks sought a meeting on an issue we'd likely disagree over. Without proper preparedness, it wasn't beneficial for either party.

Best/worst memory of an approach someone made to forward their issue or start a relationship? The best way to grab a staffer's attention, or even a member's attention, is to make it a personal issue. When someone could make the issue relevant to the district, or to me personally, it helped their effort and made it easier for me to relay their interests back to my boss.

Best tip for approaching legislators on an issue? Be reasonable and respectful. There are some times that are better than others to approach members directly.

The Hill Insiders (Continued)



Rohit Kumar

Principal
PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP

Rohit was the former deputy chief of staff for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY)

Favorite way to be approached: Since I was in the Leader's office, ideally we would be approached with an idea after some groundwork had been laid with the committee(s) of jurisdiction, where there was both a policy case for the idea, and some thought had been given to political advantages and liabilities. [I'd give] bonus points if you identified those who would oppose, why they would oppose, and why those arguments should not prevail.

Pet peeve: It always irked me when someone came to the office and referred to the Senator by his first name (except in rare circumstances where they knew him before he was elected, or were in fact a close personal friend). For the vast majority of people who came into the office, neither was true.

Best/worst memory of an approach someone made to forward their issue or start a relationship? The absolute worst was when someone opened the conversation by mentioning how much they had donated or raised for the Leader. We weren't in the (patently illegal) business of trading donations for favors. Save the political fundraising talk for the places where it is appropriate.

Best tip for approaching legislators on an issue? Think through the issue from the legislator's perspective. Why does this make sense as both a policy and a political matter? The law-making process is inherently political, and thus politics matter. Think about how an elected official would explain this to a hometown newspaper, or a voter whose support they need for reelection. All the policy arguments in the world will do you no good if the politics aren't aligned, as well.



David Thompson

Vice President of Public
Policy at the National
Council of Nonprofits

David worked for six years as a senior counsel and as a policy director for the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

Favorite way to be approached: I preferred an email introduction with a request to meet in my office, a summary of the issue at hand (in case I wasn't the right person), and a signal about timeliness. If the matter was urgent - amendment on the Senate floor; heads-up on research, whether positive or damaging - then

pick up the phone, text, or stop by. Drop-ins are hit or miss. On a busy day, they are annoying, but on a calm day they may be a great opportunity to sit and meet.

Pet peeve: When folks hadn't done their homework before a meeting. Knowing my boss' position, or the composition of the district, was important, and even if folks sought a meeting on an issue we'd likely disagree over. Without proper preparedness, it wasn't beneficial for either party.

Best/worst memory of an approach someone made to forward their issue or start a relationship? The best way to grab a staffer's attention, or even a member's attention, is to make it a personal issue. When someone could make the issue relevant to the district, or to me personally, it helped their effort and made it easier for me to relay their interests back to my boss.

Best tip for approaching legislators on an issue? Be reasonable and respectful. There are some times that are better than others to approach members directly.

The Hill Insiders (Continued)



Anonymous

A former senior legislative assistant for a Republican Congressman from Georgia

Favorite way to be approached: By email or phone, and send a follow-up, if need be. If you email too often and don't get a reply, you may need assistance with a colleague in common, especially for senior or leadership staff. Targeted and blanket advocacy emails that go to listservs usually get sent to spam or are deleted.

Pet peeve: Making any sort of threats or pressure related to the member's election, or not being prepared, or knowing enough about the member or the state or district. Also, assuming that the staffer created the circumstance, or has the ability to solve the problem on his or her own.

Best/worst memory of an approach someone made to forward their issue or start a relationship? I don't have one particular memory, but one of the worst things a group or individual can do is go over the staffer to their superior to address an issue, because they don't think the legislative assistant is senior enough. That should only happen if the staffer is completely unresponsive.

I also preferred when outside groups or individuals made an attempt to meet me before they made a series of regular requests, "i.e. introductory visits or coffees." The worst was when someone walked in asking for a meeting without any email, prior conversation, or phone call.

Best tip for approaching legislators on an issue? Be prepared to deliver key information about the legislator's districts or interests. If the member is a doctor, focus on the profession he or she had prior to being in Congress, for example. Know the statistics of his or her constituency, and don't take issues to the office if you know the member historically never supports those issues. It's better to spend your time developing supportive stakeholders, and working your way gradually to gaining atypical supporters (if it's a partisan issue). If you have a bipartisan issue, it is always good to have a champion or key stakeholder that will help offer influence with his or her colleagues. You must gain the staffers trust and relationship before achieving this, however.

24 Do's & Don'ts

when approaching a Congressional staffer



Do

1. Spend time rallying stakeholders prior to approaching the legislator.
2. Know ahead of time who will oppose your idea and how to respond to it.
3. Start off with an email requesting a meeting.
4. Be professional, transparent and genuine.
5. Make the issue relevant and personal to the staffer or legislator.
6. Be on time.
7. Relax. They're people too.
8. Stay out of the weeds. The details can come later if he or she is interested.
9. Use what you've got. If you already know a staffer in an office, ask them who handles your issue.
10. Gain as an ally a close friend of the member of Congress you would like to approach. Sneaky, but effective.
11. Ask how you can help the elected official or their staff member.
12. Follow up in a timely manner. Especially if you're clarifying an issue for them.



Don't

1. Intentionally mislead a staffer—explicitly or implicitly.
2. Refer to a member of Congress by his or her first name, unless you're a close personal friend.
3. Try to wine and dine a staffer to "buy" his or her time.
4. Go to a meeting without doing your homework first.
5. Take an issue to a member's office if they've historically never supported it.
6. Talk endlessly about your issue or yourself. Neither are that interesting.
7. Bring up your issue if you meet a staffer/Member in the supermarket. They have a right to be off the clock.
8. Mention the campaign or donations if the discussion is about your issue
9. Have three double-vodkas before approaching a staffer at a party. You don't need them!
10. Continue to call when an email exchange will suffice.
11. Mix up a staffer or Member's political party. It happens!
12. Try to have protracted discussions about policy. No one has the time.

The Approachers



Dan Colgrove

Dan started his career as a legislative aide in the California State Assembly, and went on to work in government relations for a number of entities, including the Grocery Manufacturers Association and DineEquity. He owns his own public policy company, ACME Public Affairs, and serves as a senior advisor at the public relations firm Goddard Gunster.

Favorite way to approach a legislator/staffer:

Direct contact. Either call or email. Calling can be better because you'll actually get a live body. If you're in Washington D.C. you can also do a drop-by.

Things to avoid when approaching a legislator/staffer: You should not go on too long about whatever is on your mind. Get to the point. And don't be disrespectful.

Best/worst memory of an approach: I'm often pleasantly surprised when talking to members, or their staff, that they're willing to help even if it's an issue they disagree on. They're at least willing to talk to you.

Best tip for approaching legislators/staffers: Relax. They're people too.



Anne DeSeta DarConte

Anne runs Beyond K Street, and has more than 25 years of public affairs experience, with ten-plus years focused on industries in the chemical, petrochemical and refining space. She's known for her work developing grassroots and Hill Day best practices as well as her support of women in advocacy.

Favorite way to approach a legislator/staffer:

Briefly connect on some level by knowing your audience. Raise something you discussed in your last encounter, an event you both recently attended, or even the standing or score of a sports team he or she follows.

Things to avoid when approaching a legislator/staffer:

There are several "no-no's" to remember for meetings. Be on time. Never mention the campaign or contributions. Always be honest. If you are not sure of the answer to a question, don't pretend you do. Say you are not sure, offer to follow-up, and then follow-up in a timely manner.

Best memory of an approach: Finding out in conversation that a personal friend of mine had been the legislator's college roommate; that immediately gave me credibility!

Best tip for approaching legislators/staffers: I live close to Capitol Hill and run into legislators often when in the supermarket, or eating out. It's important to remember that these are regular people with families and lives. Just like us, they too have a need to be off the clock. Exchange pleasantries, but leave the business discussion for the office or professional events. subject matter experts, political supporters, or a person who sincerely wants to work with them.

The Approachers (Continued)



Krista L. Cox

Director of public policy initiatives for the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

Prior to joining ARL she worked as a staff attorney at two nonprofits, meeting with Congressional offices and Administration officials to promote the interests of the organizations she represented.

Favorite way to approach a legislator/staffer:

I think the best way to approach a Congressional office is to start where a relationship is already established. Sometimes it's an issue that you've already worked on with that office, so the staff member is already well versed in the issue and your position. Other times, it's a new issue, but I still prefer to go to the staff member I'm familiar with and ask who in the office handles the issue.

Things to avoid when approaching a legislator/staffer:

Be professional and have your pitch prepared. Get to the point quickly and stay out of the weeds. The details can come later if he or she is interested.

Best/worst memory of an approach: I once joined a colleague from another organization to meet with a staff member for the first time. I was very surprised when the staff member resorted to name-calling our organizations, and talking about his lack of respect for some of the members of Congress who were supportive of our positions. My colleague and I sat in that meeting for an hour trying to persuade this staff member. Looking back, we wasted an hour arguing with him. While it's important to keep an open mind, sometimes working with a particular office on a certain issue just isn't feasible. Don't waste valuable time and resources.

Best tip for approaching legislators: Look for ways that you can work together. It's important to build relationships so that you can raise concerns about certain issues, or find ways to build support around other issues. Approach elected officials and staffers with the goal of opening up dialogue, if you can. Be constructive with criticisms, and ask how you can help.



Kevin O'Hara

Kevin's background includes stints as government affairs manager for the American

Society of Landscape Architects and Education Credit Management Corporation, an organization that guarantees student loans. Currently he serves as vice president of urban and government affairs for the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA).

Favorite way to approach a legislator/staffer:

It's a combination of picking up the phone to request a meeting, and using a constituent to help facilitate the connection. Email usually works well. Staffers are often busy and rarely have time for protracted discussions about policy.

Things to avoid when approaching a legislator staffer:

Never discuss campaigning or "the election." Also, never BS an official (or their staff). If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them, and say you'll get them the information ASAP.

Best/worst memory of an approach: The ability to cultivate a new champion for your issue(s) by simply making the proper connection, and opening a constructive dialogue never ceases to amaze me. In most instances, especially during an election year, staff and members are willing to go the extra mile for their constituencies.

Best tip for approaching legislators/staffers: Be respectful, positive, and honest. Offer to be a resource, regardless of whether or not you agree on a given issue. Most of all, deliver on your promises; get them the information or response you promised, when you promised it. Patience is key. Members and staff often have busy schedules and are difficult to pin down for meetings on the first request. Remain flexible regarding meetings, and understand that cultivating a relationship takes time.

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