

Know Your Audience

Strategies for Opening Channels of Communication



When communicating with elected officials or stakeholders, it is important to understand their background and perspective: this will inevitably lead to a more productive conversation. Identifying common ground with elected officials and key stakeholders can help to open up channels of communication.

Even if your organization cannot lobby, you can always communicate and educate, build an advocate for your cause, and have your organization seen as an information source. You can still add congress people to your email list, make use of earned media, publish public statements, etc. Developing resources, short one- to two-page fact sheets, and letters to the editor can be very helpful. What constitutes “lobbying” can vary state to state, whereas federal guidelines are more straightforward. Running a public affairs campaign is always allowable and not considered lobbying.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE?

- » Identify common ground with elected officials by understanding their background and record.
- » Identify ideas for utilizing effective storytelling, compelling narratives, and relevant messengers to drive home a message.
- » Feel prepared to partake in constructive conversations with policy leaders who may not agree with you but are willing to hear your message.
- » Identify ways to amplify your message after meetings.



WAYS TO UNDERSTAND YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

1. Understand their **personal background** (e.g., personal story, academic background, marital status, and religious beliefs).
 - » Think about ways to break the ice, similar to how you would in a networking event.
 - » Scan their office—what have they chosen as decorations, perhaps indicating interests or histories, such as colleges/universities, hobbies, sports and favorite teams, etc.
 - » Research their campaign website, if possible..you'll often find more personal history and details than on elected official websites. You may also be able to see the issues that are important to them, based on their campaign platform.
 - » Create a short list of key facts as a quick resource, so you don't forget in the moment.
 - » Pay attention to what resonates...when you notice a connection or a positive response in the conversation, focus on that connection, and remember it for next time, too.
 - » Try to make your first introduction in person, rather than on email or social media.
2. Understand their **policy background** (e.g., prior jobs to holding office, public statements on policy issues, record votes, sponsored bills).
 - » Research past voting history or voting score cards when available to understand their priorities (e.g., [Vote Smart](#), [Planned Parenthood](#), [NRA](#), [American Conservative Union](#)). Even voting cards maintained by agencies antithetical to your mission can be helpful in understanding a policymaker's voting record.
3. Understand their **district**: who do they represent—demographically?
 - » Members want to say, "I'm doing what my district wants," or "I'm voting with my district."
 - » Try to connect your issue with data to demonstrate their constituents support it. If there aren't existing data, consider conduct a quick survey or poll, or share a petition to demonstrate the will of their constituents.
4. Understand their **donors**: who provides campaign contributions and does that provide insight into their base/background?

IDENTIFY THE BEST MESSENGER

1. Once you have an understanding of who you're talking to, figure out the **best messenger** to convey your narrative
 - » **Constituents**: make sure you find folks who are represented by the member.
 - » **Compelling Narratives**: family stories, hardships overcome, happy-ending stories.
 - » You may want to select a couple of messengers—perhaps one shares the evidence and statistics, while another shares a personal narrative that makes an emotional connection that pulls on the heartstrings.
2. Ensure your messenger **knows the message!**

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

» **Be prepared.**

Understand to whom you're talking and their background.

» **Choose your messenger wisely**

What are you asking for? Is this the best messenger? Will they make an impact?

» **Stick to your talking points.**

Do not digress to other topics.

» **Stay respectful.**

The issue may be contentious, but the conversation doesn't have to be. You may gain some ground in a positive interaction.

» **Choose your language wisely.**

Be aware of partisan language or connotations.

» **Ensure there is appropriate follow-up.**

Become a trusted information source. With relationships and trust comes access.

CHOOSE YOUR NARRATIVE WISELY

- » Decide on your narrative ahead of time, and base it on the background of your elected leader, the messenger, and what has worked in the past.
- » What are you asking for? Have a cohesive ask—and it may just be that you wanted to introduce yourself, but be clear about what you are asking for.
- » Identify your best talking points and stick to them.
- » Do not get trapped in a messaging battle with someone who is unlikely to agree with you—keep it top-level, big picture. It may be tempting to talk about current events or other issues, but keep it simple and stick to your talking points.
- » Provide anecdotes and examples.

FOLLOW UP IS ESSENTIAL

Follow up to develop and maintain relationships and build trust...which can lead to access. You want to become their trusted source for information.

- » Remember the front-desk staff people are the gatekeepers, and they may be most able to help you in future communications.
- » Pick up business cards from the office, add those staff people to your email list, and use your email list to share communications and updates from your agency, such as new resources and studies, relevant news stories, etc. In this way, you can become a trusted source for information on adolescent health.
- » Invite the local official to your events—plug them into your network so they can see firsthand the important work that you're doing.
- » Legislators do pay attention to what local officials say—if you can get local officials such as school boards, county councils, mayors, etc., on board with your message, you can ask them to carry your message to state legislators.
- » Even when your congressperson is not with you on an issue and won't vote how you would want, you could ask them not to obstruct the vote or filibuster it.

RESOURCES

Healthy Teen Network

www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org

- » [Navigating the Politics of Public Health, 4-Part Advocacy Webinar Series](#)
- » [Finding Common Ground, Issue Brief](#)
- » [Position Statements](#)
- » [Public Policy Recommendations](#)
- » [Tip Sheet: The Art of Verbal Storytelling](#)
- » [An American Frame: Teen Pregnancy and Parenting](#)
- » [Customized Training and Technical Assistance](#)
- » [More Public Policy and Advocacy Resources](#)

Center for Community Change

www.CommunityChange.org

- » [Messaging this Moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators](#)

Youth Catalytics

www.YouthCatalytics.org

- » [Messages that Matter: Communication Webinar Prep Series](#)

Spitfire Strategies

www.SpitfireStrategies.com

- » [Smart Chart 3.0: An Interactive Tool to Help Nonprofits Make Smart Communications Choices](#)
- » [Discovering the Activation Point](#)
- » [Planning to Win: The Just Enough Guide for Campaigners](#)
- » [Smart Plan: Spitfire's Guide to Crisis Prep and Management](#)

Full Focus Communications

www.FullFocusCommunications.com

FrameWorks Institute

www.FramWorksInstitute.org

- » [Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support](#)
- » [Talking About Youth: Reframing the Discussion](#)

Capacity Canada

www.CapacityCanada.ca

- » [Stories Worth Telling: A Guide to Storytelling for Nonprofits](#)

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