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Help for Associations, Nonprofits and Advocacy Professionals from CQ Roll Call

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10 Strategies to Successfully Brief a Hill Staffer or Lawmaker

Helping Hill staffers become micro-experts on your issue through a proper briefing is the first step to convince them that your issue deserves attention.

Here are 10 strategies to help you properly prepare and implement a successful meeting with a staffer or lawmaker.

1. Send a brief description

Once you finally got a staffer or lawmaker to agree to meet with you at a scheduled a time, you will need to approach them the right way. Email the staffer or lawmaker a brief paragraph or one-page document on the issue you want to discuss with them, says Sue Nelson, the Vice President of Federal Advocacy at the American Heart Association.

“That way, they can talk to people in their office about the issue to get prepared. When you get there, they will have already had a chance to look at it. This allows you to really get to the point very quickly because you don’t have to go over a lot of background.”

2. Make sure the staffer knows the head count of who’s coming

There is nothing worse than saying you’re coming with one person and you show up with five, Nelson says. “Then, the room they got for you will be too small and they will have to scramble around,” she says. “These are logistical things, but they can really set the tone for the meeting.”

3. Be prepared

The most important thing from a substantive perspective, Nelson points out, is to know your issue. “Have all your arguments in line,” she says.

“Do your research on a member and see the links between your issue and their district. Some background can tell you the things they are for or against, so you will know not to talk positively about something that they are going to have a negative reaction to. Know who you are talking to and what they care about and try to find a connection between your issue and them. Have all the facts at your fingertips and anticipate what they are going to ask you.”

For example, Nelson is advocating for a bill that would replace the direct supervision requirements for cardiac rehabilitation with nurse practitioners and physician assistants, instead of physicians. “We anticipated the question to be ‘will doctors be upset, is this a scope of practice issue?’” Sure enough, the question has been asked at every Hill meeting.

Nelson says that she has been able to show at the Hill briefings that the AHA has done research and has received support from cardiologists and specialists favoring the proposed legislation.

4. Bring your business card

Sounds obvious, right? But it is easy to forget, Nelson recalls from experience. “The first thing the receptionist asks for is your card," she says. "It is really embarrassing when you show up to a lawmaker's office without a card."

5. Show up on time

Getting off on the right foot is very important, says Nelson. "Showing up on time sounds like a small thing, but absolutely do not be late," Nelson says. "They might be late, but you can't be."

6. Bring a constituent

The best thing you can do is to bring a constituent with you, Nelson says. "That makes a meeting. I was on the Hill for NIH research and the constituent that I brought was a high school basketball player who had suffered a sudden cardiac arrest. I had four meetings."

In fact, bringing a constituent gives you the best chance of meeting with the actual lawmaker. "And even then, usually it should be a contributor, someone they know as a friend, or owns a big company in their district."

If you can't take a constituent, bring letters from your association members related to the issue. "Make the connection to the state or district because that is who the lawmakers and staffers work for," Nelson points out.

7. Be brief

"Here is the background, here is the issue," Nelson says.

A typical briefing with a staffer, Nelson says, is about 30 minutes or less, depending on the issue and their level of interest. On Lobby Days, your meeting can be even shorter.

"The sooner you get to the point, the sooner they can start thinking through what they need to do next."

If you do meet with the member, it will be very brief. "Member meetings are the shortest because they will just stop in," Nelson says. "It's really 'story, ask, go.'"

In addition, if you are going with multiple people, Nelson suggests to plan in advance who is going to say what. "Cover every aspect of the meeting so you are all not all saying the same thing," she says.

8. Don't give them too much stuff

"Avoid giving them too much paper," Nelson recommends. "Don't hand them volumes because it just makes them tired—it's just more stuff to read. They will just throw it away. Email material or put it on disc."

9. Try to establish a personal connection with the person

Try to figure out something that you have in common with the staffer or Congress member—some way to remember each other.

"But at the same time, don't get too overly personal or partisan," Nelson says.

10. Don't stare at your phone

Staffers and lawmakers do not want to see you looking at your phone, says Nelson: "Don't even turn your phone on. Or leave it in your purse or your pocket."

You're done, right?

Not quite. Says Nelson, "Always follow up with a thank you e-mail."

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