Setting Up Constituent Communications and Engagement Systems

Monday, February 22, 12:00 PM – 1:30 PM

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Congressional Operations

- Training, consulting, research to support a functioning Congress
- 1,000 staff from 300 offices

Citizen Engagement

- Unique studies, trainings, and resources for citizen advocates
- Connected to 91,595 Americans
• New Member Resource Center
  ▪ Google: “CMF New Member Resource Center”

• New Member Training Series
  ▪ December 2020 – June 2021

• Legislative Assistant Training
  ▪ Government Affairs Institute at Georgetown University

• District/State-Based Guidance
  ▪ *Keeping It Local*
  ▪ Templates/Manuals/Forms

• Website Guidance
  ▪ Gold Mouse Awards for Best Website
CMF Guidebooks for Freshman Offices
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Managing Constituent Communications

This Chapter Includes...

- The growth of constituent communications, particularly email
- Determining the priority of constituent mail and outreach mail
- How to establish constituent mail policies
- CMF’s Mail System, which incorporates the best practices of other Hill offices
- Strategies to address common mail issues and improve the processing of email

One of the omnipresent facts of congressional life is hearing from constituents by letter, telephone, email, and social media. For many Americans, writing to Congress is as essential to democracy as voting. It is a way of expressing their ideas of what their government should be doing — and a Member of Congress would do well to pay attention, no matter what other demands are placed on your time.

For two decades, CMF has been working to improve communications between citizens and Members of Congress. While the Internet has made it easier to contact Congress, technological developments have been so rapid that neither the senders nor the receivers have learned to use these tools in ways that facilitate truly effective communications. Through CMF’s Partnership for a More Perfect Union, the Communicating with Congress and Congress 3.0 Projects, and management engagements with individual House and Senate offices, we have identified best practices to help you manage constituent communications effectively and efficiently so you can then focus on the many other duties of a congressional office.

Note: This chapter uses the terms “email” and “postal mail” to distinguish between electronic and paper communications. It uses the terms “mail,” “correspondence,” or “communications” to refer to both types.
CMF’s Crisis Preparedness & Response Center

• Managing Issues Related to January 6th Attack
• Managing Congressional Staff Remotely
• WFH Guides
• Best Practices for Online and Telephone Town Halls
• Managing Stress in Constituents and Staff
END CONFUSION ABOUT COMPUTERS!

Computers
March 29, 1978 3-5 p.m. CMF offices

TIME: 3-5 p.m.
PLACE: CMF Offices
201 Maryland Avenue NW
(behind the Supreme Court)

You must have a reservation to attend! Call 546-0100

HAS YOUR OFFICE SIGNED UP?
...Oh, and a few other things have changed
Congressional Correspondence Systems
Then ... and Now
DATA NEVER SLEEPS 8.0

2020 EVERY MINUTE OF THE DAY

- ZOOM Hosts 208,333 Participants in Meetings
- REDDIT Sees 479,452 People Engage with Content
- NETFLIX Users Stream 404,444 Hours of Video
- DOORDASH Diners Order 555 Meals
- INSTAGRAM Users Post 347,222 Stories
- YOUTUBE Users Upload 500 Hrs of Video
- TWITTER Gains New Users 319
- CONSUMERS SPEND $1,000,000 ONLINE
- MICROSOFT TEAMS Connect 52,083 Users
- FACEBOOK Users Share 150,000 Messages
- AMAZON Ships 6,659 Packages
- INSTAGRAM Business Profile Adds 138,889 Clicks
- SPOTIFY Adds 28 Tracks to Its Music Library
- VENMO Users Send $239,196 Worth of Payments
- TIKTOK is Installed 2,704 Times
- LINKEDIN Users Apply for 69,444 Jobs
- WHATSAPP Users Share 41,666,667 Messages
- $3,805 is Spent on Mobile Apps
- 1,388,889 People Make Video/Video Calls

PRESENTED BY DOMO
1980 - 2018

- Change in U.S. Population: 31%
- Change in Staff in U.S. House: 0%
- Change in Total Congressional Staff: -15%
Congressional Correspondence Systems
How it *FEELS* to Answer the Mail
“What we’re seeing is a 19th century institution, often using 20th century technology to solve 21st century problems.”

- Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA)
Agenda

• What constituents want from engagement
• Setting up your “mail” system
• Your website and social media presence
• Virtual town hall meetings
• Q & A
Presenters

Kathy Goldschmidt
Director of Strategic Initiatives
Congressional Management Foundation

Bradley Joseph Sinkaus
Associate Manager of Congressional Operations
Congressional Management Foundation
Presenters

**Michael Neblo**
Director
Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability (IDEA)
The Ohio State University

**Amy Lee**
Associate Director
Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability (IDEA)
The Ohio State University
What Constituents Want from Engagement
“Interactions between citizens and their representatives are very valuable to our democracy”

93%

58%

27%

8%
“What is your impression, how interested are your Congressional representatives in what you have to say?”

Very Interested/Somewhat Interested: 54%
Not Very Interested/Not at All Interested: 46%
“If I had confidence that my views were taken into account, I would find it acceptable for my Congressional representative to vote contrary to my view.”

77% Very Well/Somewhat Well
19% Not Very Well/Not Well at All
I’M LISTENING!
“Constituents who received lengthy arguments from legislators justifying their positions were no more likely to change their opinions than constituents to whom legislators provided little justification.”

David E. Broockman Stanford Graduate School of Business Daniel M. Butler Washington University in St. Louis
Focus on Value not Process

• “I hear you” not “Here’s what I think”
• Connect, don’t persuade
• Short and responsive not long and detailed
• Tie it to the district and the Member, not legislation and process

Listening also requires the Member to stop talking once in a while . . .
How Congress Uses Correspondence

Record incoming messages

95%
How Congress Uses Correspondence

Produce mail reports

92%
How Congress Uses Correspondence

Produce report at least twice/month

73%
How Congress Uses Correspondence

Share reports with the Member

46%
What is constituent engagement for?
What is constituent engagement for?
Satisfied Customers Tell Three Friends,

PETE BLACKSHAW

Running a Business in Today’s Consumer-Driven World
Congress Responds

Something Happens

Lobbyist Sends Citizen “Call to Action”

Citizen Responds – Engages with Congress

Congress Processes Citizen Engagement
Congress Seeks Citizen Engagement

Citizen Input Integrated into Policy Process

Citizen Engages, Responds & Provides Input

Member Considers Citizen Input

Citizen Feels that Voice was HEARD

Congress Seeks Citizen Engagement
Citizen Feels that Voice was HEARD

Congress Communicates to Citizens
“If I had confidence that my views were taken into account, I would find it acceptable for my Congressional representative to vote contrary to my view.”
Principles to Live By

• Embrace and facilitate First Amendment Rights
• Promote accessibility for all
• Foster trust
• Support Congress’ role in democracy
• Allow for different channels of communication
Setting Up Your “Mail” System
The First 90 Days of Managing Mail

1. Figure out the backlog
2. Set up a system for intake, tracking, reporting, and accountability
3. Develop a polite and helpful, but generic, response to send while you get settled
4. Develop form letters on the most common issues
5. Ensure staff receive training on your system

Do NOT let your Member HOARD THE MAIL! You will NEVER answer the backlog ... until it’s too late!
Desired Outcomes for Your “Mail” System

• Minimize staff time spent on constituent correspondence
• Prevent staff frustration responding to constituent mail
• Ensure constituent satisfaction with responses
• Minimize turnaround time from receipt to response
Implement a Two-Track System

- Mail should pass through as few hands as possible

- Steps that do not improve timeliness, responsiveness or accuracy should be eliminated

Original Draft Track: 2 - 4 Weeks

Fast Track: 1 Week
Be Strategic and Deliberate

• Strategically important messages are prioritized over . . .
  ▪ Committee Assignments
  ▪ Legislative Priorities
  ▪ Key Groups, Individuals, or Issues in District

• Less strategic messages
  ▪ Bills that never come to the floor
  ▪ Non-legislative priorities
  ▪ Issues before state or local governments
Does this message communicate...

Unfortunately, you have contacted me through a third-party communication website. As you may know, these websites are routinely used to automatically generate responses to Members of Congress which were not actually written by constituents and do not reflect the views of the constituency.
Does this message communicate...

I’M LISTENING!
Innovative “Mail” Options

Sometimes:

• A phone call is faster than an email
• Short messages with links in responses satisfy constituents
• You can nip a campaign in the bud by contacting the organization and clarifying things
• You can provide columns in groups’ e-newsletters
Websites & Social Media
Create an Online Service to Constituents

• Anticipate what constituents need now
• Connect to the district
• Explain the Member, Congress and what’s going on
• Keep it short and sweet
• Provide service not marketing
• Keep it up to date
• Enhance your other communications
“If you create marketing that people genuinely want you can dispense with the ‘shock,’ ‘awe,’ and ‘viral’ – and focus on solving problems, answering questions, and creating long-lasting customer relationships.”

- Jay Baer, *Youtility: Why Smart Marketing is about Help not Hype* (2013)
Social Media Use in Congress

• 116th Congress produced more than 2.2 million tweets and Facebook posts

• Posts from members received:
  ▪ 2 billion favorites and reactions across Twitter and Facebook
  ▪ 500 million retweets & shares
Social Media Advice from Veteran Chiefs

• Don’t run before you can walk
• Start slowly and ramp up as you go
• Begin collecting data points
• Read the Congressional Research Service’s white paper on social media rules
• Establish a two-person review policy for posting anything
• Reserve Twitter handles early
Consider having your Communications Director oversee constituent communications operations.
Consider having your **Communications** Director oversee constituent **communications** operations.
Save Time by Recycling Content

Email → Approval
Speech → Approval
Talking Points → Approval
Social Media Content → Approval

Constituent
Save Time by Recycling Content

Content → Approval

Speech → Constituent
Letter → Constituent
E-Mail → Constituent
Talking Points → Constituent
E-newsletter → Constituent
Facebook → Constituent
Website → Constituent
Press Release → Constituent
Virtual Town Hall Meetings
Town Halls?!?
“How I wish this tool had been available when I served in Congress –it could finally change the tenor of our public debate and at last include citizens into Congressional decision making in a meaningful way. This process could begin to restore America’s trust in its government and representative’s accountability to their constituents.”

“This was a great forum. It actually made me feel like I had a voice in government.”

“I believe we are experiencing the one way our elected representatives can hear our voices and do what we want.”

“I don’t agree with everything he said, but it was good to get feedback from someone like him who is supposed to be working for us.”

“That he is having this dialogue online is a great thing, and I would like to see much more of this, with all senators and congressmen.”
Ground Breaking Research

- A representative group of constituents
- Single issue to ensure focus, depth, and substance
- Non-partisan background information on the issue in advance
- Neutral third-party moderator
- Real-time candid participation by elected official
Conducted Like a Drug Trial

Recruitment of subjects → Pre-session survey → Controls 1 (two-page materials and no session) → Controls 2 (no session or background materials) → Two-page materials and participation in session with MC → Post-session survey (one week after session) → Post-election survey
The findings were startling!

- A representative group of constituents participated, not just the “usual suspects”
- The conversations were substantive and high-quality
- Constituents learned about the issue and many changed their minds
- 95% of constituents found the forums “very valuable for our democracy”
- 97% would like to participate in future sessions
The findings were startling!

Constituents reported:

12%+ increase in approval of their member

20%+ increase in trust in their member

35%+ increase in approval of “handling” the issue (immigration)
Participants were more likely to be politically engaged after the sessions.
“Connecting to Congress” in 2021

- Pandemic recovery assistance
- Healthcare
- Digital regulation
- Issues requested by offices
Connecting to Congress has digital tools

Common Ground for Action forums

online Deliberative Town Halls

based the same deliberative principles
“Connecting to Congress” in 2021

A Free Service to Congressional Offices

- Host and facilitate online Deliberative Town Halls or Common Ground for Action
- Engage a broad cross-section of constituents on emerging policy issues
- Produce reports that summarize trust and approval of members, and constituents’ informed opinions, priorities, and motivations on policy
- Help offices integrate this information and new technology into office workflows
- **Consistent with House & Senate Ethics Rules!**
Solving the Congressional capacity problem

Organizing → Conducting → Analyzing

← We handle
Please provide us with feedback!

We value your opinion and want to make our programs even better.
Creating and Implementing a Legislative Agenda

March 19, 12:00-1:30 pm ET/9:00-10:30 am PT
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