
*On the Hill, less is much
more if your message has
heart and comes from it*

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When I went to Capitol Hill this spring to research healthcare lobbying, I expected the corridors of power to be lined with Gucci-wearing lobbyists. While I did encounter a few professional lobbyists, I was more profoundly struck by the ubiquitous presence of ordinary citizens voicing their concerns to Congress. On a typical day, one might cross paths with a crowd of nurses wearing purple and gold tee shirts (representing the Service Employees International Union), attend an awards ceremony sponsored by the National Breast Cancer Coalition, or chat with physicians at an evening reception sponsored by the American College of Emergency Physicians.

I learned quickly that members of Congress and their staff want to hear from people at the grassroots. While congressional staff members individually might receive as many as 100 voicemail messages a day (more than could ever reasonably be returned), they make a point of returning calls from constituents in their local areas.

Staffers think that hearing from constituents helps them to know what citizens (and voters) are “really” concerned about, as opposed to what lobbyists and the media claim they want. If members of Congress know that a particular interest group does a good job connecting them with their constituents, they are more likely to turn to that group as a source of useful information and ideas.

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Citizen lobbying is a powerful signal to policy makers precisely because it is hard to do well.

Leveraging grassroots organization can be a smart way to augment Washington lobbying, but it also has pitfalls. If congressional staff suspect that grassroots mobilization is merely “Astroturf,” they may discount the legitimacy of an organization’s broader lobbying efforts. I spoke informally with Hill staffers about what they think makes grassroots organization effective. Three clear themes emerged:

1. Effective grassroots advocacy accurately reflects the nature and strength of local interest in an issue. It is tempting to try to create the appearance of local interest by generating template letters and patch-through phone calls from citizens who have little knowledge of or passion about a cause. Such efforts are quickly detected and classified as effectively fraudulent. They are based on the faulty assumption that greater numbers necessarily equal greater impacts. A single well-written and sincere letter from a person directly affected by some problem is likely to carry more weight than 100 letters generated by sophisticated direct-mail or Internet strategies.

If an organization can connect a congressional office with one small business owner harmed by a regulation, one research scientist whose medical research is stifled by inadequate funding, or one patient whose life is jeopardized by a rare disease, this may help to make a difference. A few quality contacts trump faked mass support.

2. Effective grassroots advocacy connects systematic problems with specific stories. Staffers want to hear from people who are affected by policy problems at the service level. They value hearing from people who can illustrate general trends with concrete cases because they provide good examples to help justify broader legislation. In order to achieve this objective, it may be helpful to provide advocacy education to activists before they visit the Hill. Some of the most effective grassroots organizations, such as the National Breast Cancer Coalition, conduct this kind of training on an annual basis in order to help citizens articulate their everyday experiences in the context of the organization’s policy agenda.

3. Effective grassroots advocacy recognizes and respects the limits of what can be done through the legislative process. Individual members of Congress and most certainly staffers do not hold the power independently to fix problems or pass laws. Advocates should not demand too much from any one person with

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whom they might meet. Several staffers (especially those working with the appropriations committees that allocate money for medical research) expressed severe dismay about having to meet with victims of diseases and their family members because “they sometimes claim that it is my fault that they are sick or aren’t going to get better.” One interest group representative told me that she was instructed by a Hill staffer, “I’ll meet with your lobbyist, but I just can’t deal with that grandmother [of a disease victim] anymore.”

Congressional staffers want to help, and they will — by raising the issue with their superiors, writing letters, and trying to drum up support for a cause. But they cannot work miracles, and effective advocates recognize that.

Not every professional society, trade association, or advocacy group can hope to have millions of members or facilities distributed across the United States. Peak associations like AARP are a rare breed. But every organization has a home somewhere and is an important constituent of some members of Congress.

Given that fact, most associations would be well served by increasing the degree to which they make the legitimate voices and concerns of their members known to policy makers in Washington. The most well organized and effective advocates are not necessarily the most numerous; they are those that explain how real people, businesses, and institutions are affected by social problems or arcane policies. With patience, clear explication, and strategic networking, Congress will sit up and take notice. ■

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