

Legislators like mail up close and personal

By Jim Nowlan

Four things to keep in mind when thinking about contacting your state legislator or congressman: Your contact with their office is important to them. Second, most lawmakers try to be responsive to their incoming communications; after all, it is in their re-election interest. Three, they receive boatloads of mail, most of it now email. Finally, good information is valuable to a legislator who cannot be expert on the myriad topics that he or she confronts.

So how then, a reader asks, can a voter communicate most effectively with his state or federal lawmaker?

Elected officials see voters and interest groups at the margin of their base. For example, if Representative A won his last race by a margin of 52%-48%, he might think of that vote as his base. But, frets the lawmaker, he will undoubtedly see some of his base erode because of votes he cast that upset this or that group. So he is always trying to build on his base of support, one or a few votes at a time, and “at the margin” even a single vote is important.

Good information is also important to elected officials. The lawmaker receives plenty of info, pro and con, from lobbyists for interest groups, most of which are headquartered outside the lawmaker’s district. Personalized information that explains how a piece of legislation specifically affects you or your business is invaluable independent communication.

Lawmakers today receive much more mail than I did as a legislator in an earlier era, but the principles are the same: the more personal the contact, the more effective it is. Person to

person contact beats a phone call which beats a personal letter or email, which is many times more effective than canned or form email.

Interest groups have perfected the art of making a single click on the computer all it takes for you to send an email to your legislator. As state Rep. Richard Morthland (R-Cordova) notes: “As soon as I get three emails that are the same, I know it’s a form email.”

Many people think a legislator is always in Springfield or Washington, but for the state lawmaker it may be only 50-60 days a year in Lincoln’s hometown, and most members of Congress are home Mondays and Fridays, though busy.

Representative Lisa Dugan (D-Bradley) says in her case it is always better to contact her district office, by phone or email.

I always found that communication can be more relaxed and complete if it is in the lawmaker’s home office, when they are away from the hurly-burly of a legislative session.

State house deputy majority leader Frank Mautino (D-Spring Valley) prefers face-to-face meetings with people, “so I can find out what’s really, deep down, on their minds.” He adds: “Do not send Xerox letters. Much better is a handwritten letter with a couple of good arguments for your position.”

The mail is heavy: a thousand or more emails (much of it form email) and 50 phone calls a day when the legislature is in session, plus a hundred letters a week.

And never underestimate the importance of staff. Each state lawmaker has at least one assistant; U.S. congressmen have many. A staff member usually handles the constituent inquiries from voters who are having problems with the Secretary of State’s office or the state Department of Human Services. Linda Daley, who has been a district assistant to state Rep. David Leitch (R-

Peoria) for 20 years, is a real pro. She counsels those who have a problem with state government as follows:

Call the legislator's office and ask if your problem can be handled better by letter or email. Try to get the name of the person you talked with in state government. When ready to contact a legislative office, have any paperwork available.

[Sometimes, a legislative issue is time sensitive and you must go to Springfield before a vote is taken. State senators have offices in the Capitol and are generally willing to see you, if briefly. Check with their secretaries. The House has a tradition in which anyone can stand at the door of the House chamber when in session and give the doorkeeper a slip of paper with your name on it, or a business card. The doorkeeper will take the slip in to members, who are generally quite good about coming out to speak with you briefly.]

Remember, it is in the legislator's best interests to take you seriously. Don't hesitate to get up close and personal with your communication.

---