

Political Advocacy for Your Theatre

Making a Legislative Visit: the Most Effective Way to Influence Your Legislator

Even if you do not consider yourself a political activist, you are probably advocating for your theatre every day with a variety of constituencies: audiences, potential audiences, funders, patrons, local press, artists. Just as you already “market” your theatre to these groups, you should consider your elected officials just another segment of your community with whom you stay in regular contact. The most effective and influential way of communicating with your legislators is a personal visit to their district office. Legislators are usually interested in meeting with constituents. This “Grassroots Kit” should help you in conducting visits with your legislators at all levels of government.

Arranging the Appointment

A legislator’s typical schedule. Generally, legislators are in Washington Tuesday through Thursday and are frequently home in the district Friday through Monday and when Congress is in recess. Legislators also tend to schedule meetings on Saturdays.

Locating your legislator’s telephone number and address. Usually, the telephone number and address of your legislator’s district office can be found in the business section of your telephone book under the legislator’s last name. Your legislator’s office in Washington can be contacted by calling the Capital Switchboard at (202) 224-3121.

When you call your legislator’s office, ask to speak with the person who handles the legislator’s schedule. Keep in mind that each congressional office schedules appointments differently, but usually they are arranged by the legislator’s scheduler or appointment secretary.

When you speak to the scheduler, introduce yourself and explain that you are a constituent. Tell the scheduler the date and time you would like to meet with your legislator (be flexible) and the general topics you wish to discuss. If there is more than one person attending the meeting, let the scheduler know their names and affiliations. Also, if someone in your group knows the legislator, personally or professionally, make sure that the scheduler is aware of the relationship. Call the day before to confirm the appointment as legislator’s schedules are always changing.

Expect the meeting to be scheduled for 15-20 minutes. However, it often turns out that if the meeting is going well, you may get more time with your legislator than you expected.

Do not be surprised or upset if you meet with your legislator’s staff person. Legislative staffers are very important in the legislative process. They are responsible for gauging constituents’ views on issues and communicating them to your legislator. Legislative staffers handle all the detail work on issues and therefore, legislators rely heavily on their knowledge and expertise.

Preparing for the Meeting

Do your homework! Know what issues are important to your legislator, and try to find out their current position on the issue that you are going to discuss. You can find out by looking at their biography (which your legislator’s office can send you, and is accessible online at <http://congress.org>), by reviewing their voting record, by identifying the committees on which they serve or by calling Laurie Baskin at Theatre Communications Group (212-609-5900) or the American Arts Alliance (202-207-3850).

Compile important facts and figures. All legislators want to improve the economy and quality of life in their district and state. It is your job to convince them that the arts are an essential component to these two aspects of a community. Provide your legislator with an economic impact study on the arts and written materials about education and outreach programs your organization provides to the community. In addition, describe how the NEA funds, other public dollars and charitable deductions have contributed to your successes in the community.

Be organized. If you are part of a group, it is a good idea to organize a meeting beforehand. Decide who will discuss what and in what order the participants will speak. Be certain everyone agrees on the central message and what will be asked of the legislator. This

way you will avoid a possible internal debate in front of your legislator. Try to anticipate the counter arguments and potential questions your legislator may ask you. Refer to TCG's *Importance of Federal Funding for the Arts: Talking Points* for more information.

Prepare an information packet to leave with your legislator. This packet should include information on your organization (i.e., artistic mission, outreach and educational programs, economic impact studies, fact sheets on relevant issues, posters, brochures, newsletters, etc.). Make sure you attach your business card to the packet.

Making the Presentation

Be on time and be patient! Respect your legislator's busy and forever changing schedule by arriving at the office promptly and accommodating interruptions.

Always begin your meeting by thanking your legislator for taking the time to visit with you. If your legislator has been supportive of your cause, you should thank him/her for his/her support as well.

Explain to your legislator who you represent and why you asked for the meeting. If you are in a group, you should individually introduce yourself and briefly describe your organization.

Present your concerns and stay focused. Be very clear and concise. Get to the point quickly by being brief and direct. When presenting the issue, do not assume your legislator has any prior knowledge of the subject. Stress how each issue affects your organization's ability to serve the community at large. Your presentation should convey the overall message that if you "win," so does your legislator and the community.

If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, and promise to get back to your legislator with the answer. Be sure to follow up on your promise as quickly as possible.

Make sure you do not do all of the talking. Give your legislator an opportunity to ask questions and respond to your concerns. More often than not, constituents leave a meeting not knowing their legislator's position.

Ask for a commitment. Do not be timid. Ask your legislator exactly where he/she stands on an issue or an aspect of a bill. You have the right to know.

If you do not get the commitment you are hoping for, remember there is no such thing as a lost cause. You may be able to convince your legislator that there are enough constituents that feel as you do, that he/she can commit to missing the vote or abstaining, rather than voting against the NEA or other funding.

Follow Up After the Meeting

Send a thank you letter to your legislator. Thank your legislator for taking the time to meet with you, and then briefly summarize the main points of the meeting.

Fill out the Congressional Report Back Form and fax it to TCG. Grassroots reports are invaluable in developing legislative strategies and tracking legislator's positions on issues of importance to the arts community. Fax the form to TCG at (212) 609-5901.

Ongoing Advocacy Efforts

Continue to cultivate your relationship with your legislator through a variety of activities. The best communication is ongoing interaction. Invite your representatives to your theatre - they will learn your accomplishments as well as your needs. When schoolchildren attend performances and send thank-you letters, send them on to your elected officials with cover notes. Crisis is not the best time to begin communication with your elected officials.

- 1) Make visits, write letters and make phone calls advocating your concerns when necessary.
- 2) Add your legislator's name to your mailing list and ask to have your organization added to your legislator's mailing list.
- 3) Send your legislator posters and other promotional items. These items make nice office decorations and serve as a reminder of your organization's role in the community.
- 4) Invite your legislator to tour your facility, to take part in an educational or outreach program, to speak at a performance or event, or a luncheon/dinner and honor them by presenting an award. Make sure during these events you create photo opportunities and then publish them in your publications. All legislators enjoy the publicity.

Other Methods of Communication

Below are additional ways to communicate with your legislators and tips for each method of communication.

Writing: ***Communicate by Mail or Fax***

Use the proper form of address. Letters should be addressed:

The Honorable [Full Name]
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator [Last Name],

And

The Honorable [Full Name],
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative [Last Name],

If writing to the Chair of a Committee, letters should be addressed to Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman.

Letters should be brief and legible. It is best to type your letter, and it should not be more than one page long.

Identify yourself and state your purpose. Introduce yourself and state your reason for writing in the first paragraph. Make sure your legislator knows you are a constituent. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it appropriately (House bill: H.R.____ or Senate bill: S.____).

Be clear and concise. It is best to focus on one issue at a time. State clearly your position and concerns regarding the issue, using personal examples. Identify the course of action you are requesting that your legislator take.

Be courteous. End your letter by saying "Thank you" and "I look forward to your response."

Fax your letter. Mail to Washington, DC is still experiencing significant delays. TCG recommends faxing your letter rather than mailing it.

Calling: ***Communicate by Phone***

Identify yourself and state that you are a constituent. Anonymous phone calls will be ignored.

Be brief. Focus on one issue at a time. State your concerns and position with the first 30 seconds of the conversation. If your call pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it appropriately (House bill: H.R.____ or Senate bill: S.____).

State your message. Identify the actions you are requesting of your legislator. Stress personal experiences and give examples.

Give facts and offer your services. Concentrate on one or two important facts that create a solid debate. Offer to provide your legislator with materials that support your position.

Be polite. Always say "Thank you" and request a written response to your call.

E-mailing: ***Communicate by E-mail***

Follow the tips for writing a letter. E-mail is an electronic letter, and you should follow the advice for writing a conventional letter.

Always include your postal address. Most legislators will respond by sending a letter through the mail rather than e-mailing a response.

Time your e-mail. If possible, send your e-mail on Wednesday or Thursday. Congressional offices receive a high-volume of mail on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday. E-mail that arrives on Wednesday or Thursday is more likely to be attended to in a timely fashion.

Limited use of e-mail. While e-mail is gaining popularity as a method to communicate with representatives, a mailed or faxed letter often carries more weight with your legislator.

Congressional Report Form

Important: Please complete this form and return to TCG. Thank you for your participation!

Information about your organization

Contact name: _____

Name of organization: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

Indicate the representatives from your organization who attended the meeting and please include their titles:

_____ <i>Artistic Director</i>	<i>Name and exact title:</i> _____
_____ <i>Managing Director</i>	<i>Name and exact title:</i> _____
_____ <i>Trustees</i>	<i>Name and exact title:</i> _____
_____ <i>Artists</i>	<i>Name and exact title:</i> _____
_____ <i>Other Staff Members</i>	<i>Name and exact title:</i> _____

Congressional Information

Name of the Member of Congress whose office you visited: _____

Who did you meet with? (Check all that apply and give the individual's name.)

_____ <i>House Member</i>	<i>Name:</i> _____
_____ <i>House Member's Staffer</i>	<i>Name:</i> _____
_____ <i>Senate Member</i>	<i>Name:</i> _____
_____ <i>Senate Member's Staffer</i>	<i>Name:</i> _____

What was the Congressperson's or staffer's position on federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts?
(Circle one.)

Strongly opposed *Leaning opposed* *Strongly supportive* *Leaning supportive* *Undecided*

Other comments on your visit (please attach extra paper if needed): _____

Return to Laurie Baskin at TCG by fax at (212) 609-5901.