

Getting to Know Your Elected Officials

One of the most important roles of a grassroots advocate is building relationships with elected officials – federal, state, and local – and communicating with them on a regular basis. Building a relationship with an elected official **before** a problem or issue comes up will make it much easier to meet with that official to discuss our industry's perspective when a problem does arise. Elected officials are always looking for resources and expert knowledge, especially from constituents, so communicating with elected officials periodically throughout the year will help position you as a credible source of information for the elected official to call upon when they have a question relating to our industry.

Personal Visits:

Your first visit should be constructed as a means for you to simply introduce yourself to the elected official and educate them about your company and our industry.

- **Make an appointment:** Legislators have a very busy schedules and most local legislators hold full time jobs in addition to their job as a council member, commissioner, or member of the school board, so you will want to make an appointment to meet with them. Be sure to provide several dates and times as options for your meeting as well as a brief description of why you would like to meet. (I live in Councilman so-and-so's district and would like to introduce myself and educate them about the company for which I work and its contribution to our community.)
- **Introduce yourself and the purpose of your meeting:** When you meet with the elected official introduce yourself and reiterate the reason for your visit. Remember you are there as a constituent and to educate them about your interests as a constituent as well as your company and our industry.
- **Do your homework:** Know some general information about the elected official with whom you are meeting (i.e., political party affiliation, how long they have been in office, on which committees they serve, what is their career field). RISE staff can assist you with gathering this information, if needed.
- **Know the elected official's position:** If you are meeting with the elected official to discuss a specific piece of legislation, try to determine their position prior to the meeting. If you are uncertain of the elected official's position, do not hesitate to ask the elected official their position on this piece of legislation during your meeting.
- **Be prepared:** Just like you, the elected official's time is valuable so you will want to keep your visit brief and stay on point with your discussion. Know the message you want to deliver and have an outline of what you want to discuss. Try to anticipate any questions the elected official may ask you and be prepared to answer them. RISE staff can assist you with preparing for your visit, if needed.
- **Engage in two-way dialogue:** While you will want to keep your meeting brief, be certain to show an interest in the work of the elected official by asking them a few general questions. (i.e., what is your number one priority for this legislative session?)
- **Be honest:** You want to be viewed as a credible resource for the elected official so you should never lie or deceive the elected official in any way. If you do not know an answer to a question, tell the elected official that you do not have the answer to their question right now, but you will consult with your colleagues and get that information to them as soon as possible.
- **Discuss impact of legislation:** If you are meeting with your elected official to discuss a specific piece of legislation, be certain to explain how the legislation would impact you, as a constituent, your company, and the elected official's constituency as a whole. RISE staff can assist you in preparing this information, if needed.
- **Show respect:** Even if you do not agree with the elected official on a certain issue, always maintain a high level of professionalism, be courteous, and show respect for the elected office.

- Have an “ask”: Try to always make a specific request or “ask” of your elected official. If it is an introductory meeting, ask that you be considered a resource for pesticide issues going forward. If discussing specific legislation, ask your elected official to take an industry supportive position on the legislation you are discussing.
- Provide written material: Provide written material that outlines the important points you made during your meeting with the elected official. RISE staff can also provide you with publications for you to use, if needed.
- Follow-up: After your meeting, send a handwritten thank you note to express your appreciation for the meeting and to invite the elected official to call upon you any time they have a question regarding our industry. Also send thank-you notes when the elected official takes the position you asked them to take.

Written Communications:

While personal visits are the most effective means of communicating with an elected official, you will also need to utilize written communications as a means of educating the elected official and advocating an industry position. Depending on the issue, your letter may be a letter written on behalf of your company or it may need to come from you, and others within your company, as constituents.

- Use official company correspondence: When your company wishes to weigh in on an issue you should use company letterhead and ensure your letter is properly addressed and conveys the proper greeting.
- Avoid form letters: Letters should be specific and personalized for your company or you as an individual constituent. RISE staff can assist you with drafting these letters, if needed.
- Be clear and succinct: Include the purpose of your letter in your opening paragraph and convey a clear message throughout the body of your letter. If you are writing to address a particular piece of legislation, be certain to explain the impact of the legislation on you as a constituent or on your company as an employer of the elected official’s constituents.
- Be courteous: As a constituent, you have the right to disagree with your elected official on issues and to voice those disagreements. When writing your elected official, however, ensure that any criticism is constructive and that you offer a realistic solution to the problem you are addressing.
- Have an “ask”: Try to always make a specific request or “ask” of your elected official. If discussing specific legislation, ask your elected official to take an industry supportive position on the legislation.
- Request a response: Request the elected official to provide you with a follow-up response to your letter.
- Maintain regular communications: It is our responsibility as constituents to educate our elected officials about our companies and our industry. As part of the relationship building process, send your elected officials copies of your annual reports, press releases, and other information, which positively reflects the importance of our industry and more importantly, your company.
- Follow-up: Send thank-you notes when the elected official takes the position you asked them to take.