

Going Social with Constituent Services

National Conference of State Legislatures
August 2012

Illinois Senate Republican Caucus
Mark Gordon

Disclaimer

'I am a slow walker, but I never walk backwards'
– Abraham Lincoln

- The presentation you are about to hear is based on actual events;
- It doesn't work as well in real life as it sounds in this presentation;
- But we try to walk forward;

Illinois Structure

- Legislature divided into four caucuses: Senate and House, Democrats and Republicans;
- Each caucus autonomous;
- Shared services: bill drafting, printing, economic forecasting, other support services;
- Springfield and district office staffs –
 - Springfield staff all employed by legislative leader of Caucus;
 - District staffs work for individual legislator, paid for out of annual allowance given to all members.

Illinois Schedule

- Annual sessions;
- January through May;
- Veto session two weeks in fall;
- Constitutional distinction but no practical difference between the even and odd-numbered years.

Effect on Constituent Services

- Senators split time between districts and Springfield;
- Need for coordination so right hand knows what left hand doing;
- District offices can feel isolated;
- Lead the horses to water but can't make them drink.

Problems we Saw

- District offices not kept apprised of legislative issues;
- District offices lacked access to technical and technological expertise of Capitol;
- Autonomous nature of district offices led to inefficiencies and inconsistencies;
- ‘Throwing away’ valuable information;
- Problems made worse in today’s world of instant electronic communication.

What We Did

- Created a district office liaison;
- Placed in communications staff;
- Greater emphasis on outreach events;
- Resource for computer issues;
- Brought district office staff to Capitol;
- Developed/developing data base system to better track constituent contacts.

District Office Liaison

- Former Springfield aide for aggressive senators;
- Knew the system in Springfield;
- Oversees all outreach programs;
- Training in computer operating systems and basic networking;
- Has the right personality – problem solver/personable/respectful of challenges district offices face.

Database System

- Frustration because we were losing valuable information;
- Goal – each time a constituent ‘touches’ the office record that contact for future reference;
- Customer-based system – retail contact model;
- Communications staff perspective – survey data;
- Need for cross referencing.

What we Use

- Monarch (Now Sold);
- Many different brands available;
- Basic need: way to track constituent contacts and casework;
- Biggest challenge is refining/distilling the information into useable categories (TMI);
- CAUTION: Need to keep political and governmental separate.

Negotiating ‘Social Media’

District office challenges

- Constituents know what is happening in legislature before you do;
- Misinformation spreads like wildfire;
- Narrow focus of interest groups turns minor actions into major crises;
- Blurs line between campaign and government;
- No more ‘steering the boat;’ instead public officials must learn to ‘shoot the rapids.’

Communication is essential

In today's uncertain and ever-changing environment, developing a strong bond with your constituents and communicating with those constituents in every way possible is essential to safely negotiating the river without getting tossed out of the boat when you come to the rapids.

Social Media –Website

- Your office address on the web;
- The constituent's first stop;
- Are you showing them what you want them to see? Is it neat? Are the dishes in the dishwasher? Is there cat or dog fur on the couch?
- Can they find their way around and locate what they need to know?
- Was the visit worth their time?

Social Media – Facebook

- Where your friends go;
- Build a bond;
- Line between Facebook page and website is blurring;
- Becoming less personal, but still more so than websites;
- It is public, so don't change clothes with the curtains open;

Social Media – E-Newsletters

- Opportunity for direct/unfiltered communication with interested constituents;
- Yes...it is 'junk mail;'
- Like real mail though, people like getting it;
- The more targeted the better;
- Get involved;
- Surveys and other forms of feedback important.

Social Media – Twitter

- Most challenging but also among the most important;
- Personal ‘Headline News’ feed;
- Very valuable at certain times of the year;
- Probably the biggest unrealized opportunity for most legislators;

Social Media – Telephone Forums

- Call from member to several thousand constituents;
- Telephone version of a town hall meeting;
- Legislator gives a briefing, asks survey questions, constituents get to ask questions and voice opinions;

Social Media – Always New

- New social media cropping up all the time;
- Keep it in perspective;
- Time and resources are always limited – determine what ‘bang’ you are getting for your ‘buck;’
- Old rule still applies: ‘No Free Lunch’ – you only get something out of it if you put effort into it.

The Take Away

- This is the age of information. Managing that information is essential to managing a legislative office;
- If you are throwing away information you are throwing away money;
- Understand the difference between managing and controlling. You can manage, but you cannot control;
- People today feel disconnected from their government. Social media gives elected officials an opportunity to connect with their constituents.