WRITE IT RIGHT

There's nothing like a letter to make constituents feel appreciated. Let them know you value their input by answering their correspondence promptly.

By Gene Rose

People are more likely to be involved—and trust government—if they receive personalized letters from their elected representatives. Writing to your constituents is a great way to respond to inquiries, provide information about your work and—by letting them know you value their opinions—show them that representative democracy works.

Legislators receive hundreds of communications each week, whether the correspondence comes via the postal service or the Internet. Although the workload to respond can be overwhelming, there are steps you or your staff can take to make sure that letter writers know how much you appreciate the time they took to contact you.

The public has a low level of awareness about state legislatures. Many of your constituents:

- Don’t know your name or how to reach you.
- Don’t know what district they live in.
- Have a limited understanding of the function of state government.

In fact, many people assume their state legislator works out of Washington, D.C.

Focus group participants express frustration that their elected officials do not connect or communicate with them. Many cannot distinguish between their state and U.S. representatives and cannot name any of them. If you can fill this communication void with clear, useful information and show your constituents you want their input, you help fight apathy and cynicism and strengthen representative democracy.

Here are some important guidelines to keep in mind when writing to your constituents:

1. Personalize written correspondences.

Nobody likes to receive mail that begins with the greeting: “Dear Resident.” You will have more success reaching your constituents if you personalize your letters. Make sure to spell names correctly.

2. Pay attention to the writer’s position.

Make sure your letter addresses the concerns of the writer. Some focus group members who made the difficult decision to get involved and write a letter, received a form letter on the other side of the issue. This confirms constituents’ suspicions that their voices are not being heard.

3. Keep the language simple.

Do not use terms or phrases that may be unfamiliar to many of your constituents. Focus group respondents often looked confused when they were asked to define terms such as “constituent” and “representative democracy.” These may be basic terms to you, but they are not commonly understood by all.

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4. Define political and legislative terms if you must use them. At the capitol, certain words, phrases or acronyms become commonplace. To the people in your district those terms are foreign and not easily understood. By simplifying, you are reaching those people who are not involved in the system.

Constituents are not as well-versed as you are in the legislative process. Frequently, they will not know how a bill becomes law. They are not sure what it means to “sponsor” a bill, for example. And they do not know what it means to be the minority party or the party “in control of” the House or Senate. It may seem like a waste of time, but studies clearly show that it is in your best interest to educate your constituents about the legislative process. If you don’t, who will?

5. Take the time to educate. By taking the time to explain the process or an issue to constituents in a positive, helpful tone, you or your staff are showing them you value their participation. Have language prepared that your staff can easily insert to make sure those constituents get a better understanding of the process. Let them know their ideas count.

6. Timing is important. People complain that it often takes a long time to hear back from a legislator. And when they do, it is a form letter. (If you must use a form letter, make sure to personalize it to the fullest extent possible.) Set an internal deadline to reply to constituent mail. Do not wait until reelection time rolls around to correspond with your constituents. Start corresponding as soon as you can after you are in office.

7. Be accessible. Often your constituents don’t know you or how to reach you. You should contact them and provide them with different ways to get in touch. Make sure your letters include your phone number, e-mail address, office hours and other ways to contact you.

8. Keep in touch. Too many people hear from their legislator only once. Be sure to keep records of those who have reached out to you. Write to them from time to time, encouraging their involvement. People like being asked to be involved and often just need the encouragement. Consider investing some of your budget in a computer program that will facilitate this data collection and allow a retrieval process by subject matter.

CHECKLIST

☑ Make sure you address your letters to constituents by their names, spelling them correctly.
☑ Respond to feedback in a timely way. Focus any staff time and energy on people who actually live in your district. They are your priority.
☑ If you are writing in response to a constituent letter, e-mail or phone call, make sure you accurately reflect back what the constituent has said.
☑ Keep the language simple. Avoid capitol jargon and acronyms that might not be understood at the restaurant across the street.
☑ If you can, set up a computer system to track who has corresponded with you in the past and the issues they have been concerned about.

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