

# Contacting Your Legislators: Protocol

California state senators and Assembly members want to hear from their constituents—you—the voters in their districts. At times your association may call on you to do some grassroots lobbying. Often, the contact from a district constituent can sway a legislator's vote.

Here are some guidelines for you to follow in contacting your legislators in person, by phone or by letter.

- **Be thoughtful.** Commend the right things which your legislator does. That's the way you'd like to be treated.
- **Be reasonable.** Recognize that there are legitimate differences of opinion. Never indulge in threats or recriminations.
- **Be realistic.** Remember that most controversial legislation is the result of compromise. Don't expect that everything will go your way, and don't be too critical when it doesn't.
- **Be accurate and factual.** The mere fact that you want or do not want a piece of legislation isn't enough. If an issue goes against you, don't rush to blame the legislator for "failing to do what you wanted." Make certain you have the necessary information and do a good job of presenting your case.
- **Be understanding.** Put yourself in a legislator's place. Try to understand his/her problems, outlook and aims. Then you are more likely to help him/her understand your business and problems.
- **Be friendly.** Don't contact your legislator only when you want his/her vote. Invite him/her to your place of business or your group meetings. Take pains to keep in touch with him/her throughout the year.
- **Give credit where it is due.** If an issue goes the way you wanted, remember that your legislator deserves first credit. He/she has the vote, not you. And, remember also that many organizations and individuals participated on your side.
- **Learn to evaluate issues.** The introduction of a legislative bill doesn't mean that it will become law. Whether you're for it or against it, don't get excited about it until you learn the who, what and why of it.
- **Support your legislator.** If he/she is running for re-election and if you believe he/she deserves it, give him/her your support. He/she needs workers and financial supporters. Don't become aloof at the time when your legislator needs your help.
- **Don't, don't, don't even hint that you think certain bills, campaigns or politics in general are not worthwhile or may be dishonest.**
- **Don't demand anything.** And don't be rude or threatening. There is always "the future," and in many cases a legislator may disagree with you on one issue and be supportive on another.
- **Don't be vague or deceptive, righteous or long-winded, and please don't remind the legislator that you are a taxpayer and voter in his/her district.** (He/she knows it!)
- **Don't be an extremist.** Remember, your legislator represents all his/her constituents—those you consider liberal and those you consider conservative. Don't condemn a legislator just because he/she supports a piece of legislation that you think is too liberal or too conservative.
- **Don't be a busybody.** Legislators don't like to be pestered, scolded or preached to. Neither do you.
- **Be cooperative.** If your legislator makes a reasonable request, try to comply with it. You can help him/her by giving him/her the information he/she needs. Don't back away for fear you are "getting into politics."

## Letter Writing

Following are guidelines for an effective letter:

- Be brief.
- Make sure the legislator knows this communication is from a constituent who lives and/or does business in the legislator's district.
- Explain how the proposed legislation affects your business, and why you support/oppose it.
- Don't attempt to give "expert" opinions. Tell how the legislation would affect your business, based on your experience and knowledge.
- Refer to bill numbers whenever possible.
- Ask for the legislator's support or opposition.
- Write the letter without copying any association-provided background information verbatim.
- Request that your legislator take a specific action by telling him/her what you desire. State the facts as you see them. Avoid emotional arguments. If you use dollar figures, be realistic.
- Ask the legislator what his/her position is.
- Keep all communications friendly and respectful. Be sure to thank your legislator for considering your views.
- Write on your personal or business letterhead if possible, and sign your name over your typed signature at the end of your message.
- Be sure your exact return address is on the letter, not just the envelope. Envelopes sometimes get thrown away before the letter is answered.
- Be reasonable. Don't ask for the impossible. Don't threaten. Don't say, "I'll never vote for you unless you do such and such." That will not help your cause; it may even harm it.
- Be constructive. If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists, but you believe the bill is the wrong approach, tell what the right approach is.

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- Send your association a copy of your letter and a copy of the response you receive from your legislator.
- Address all letters in the following manner, unless you are on a first name basis:

### State Legislature:

- Assembly Member  
The Honorable Joe/Jo Doe  
California State Assembly  
State Capitol  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
Dear Assembly Member Doe:
- Senator  
The Honorable Joe/Jo Doe  
California State Senate  
State Capitol  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
Dear Senator Doe:

### Local Elected Officials:

- Council Member  
The Honorable Joe/Jo Doe  
Councilman/woman,  
City of—  
City Hall  
City, State and Zip Code  
Dear Mr./Ms./Mrs./Miss Doe:
- County Supervisor  
The Honorable Joe/Jo Doe  
Supervisor, —County  
County Seat  
City, State and Zip Code  
Dear Sir/Madam:  
or Dear Mr./Ms./Mrs./Miss Doe:

### Guidelines for District Visits

The following guidelines may be helpful when you make district visits:

- Members of the state Legislature rely heavily on their staffs for a major portion of their responsibilities,

i.e., scheduling, advice on specific legislation, constituent problems, etc. This is why it is important to maintain some familiarity with the district office staff. However, you do want to become acquainted and develop a working relationship directly with the legislators in your district.

- Generally, the legislative schedule permits each legislator to visit the district office on Fridays and holidays.
- Always call in advance for an appointment and briefly explain the purpose of the meeting. As a business person, you are an important constituent and the politician and his aides are eager to get acquainted.
- If the meeting with the senator or Assembly member is for the purpose of discussing specific legislation, review the background information and position statements available from your association and use the bill numbers when possible.
- Ask the legislator for his/her position on issues and how he/she will vote.  
We encourage you to consider other activities as ways of effectively maintaining liaison with your district legislators:
- Invite other members of your profession to join you and your legislator for lunch.
- Invite your legislator to visit your company before opening. You may want to have a short meeting between your employees and the legislator. The legislator could make brief remarks, followed by a question-and-answer period.
- Offer to help organize an information business advisory group to meet regularly with your legislators to discuss business and key industry issues.

### Telephone Procedures

- When the Legislature is in session, call the Capitol office; during recess and on Fridays, call the district office.
- Ask to speak directly to the legislator. If he/she is not available, ask to speak to the administrative assistant or legislative aide.
- When the legislator or his/her assistant is on the line, identify yourself and mention the name of your company and the fact that you are from the legislator's district.
- State the reason for the call. Use bill numbers whenever possible.
- Explain how the proposed legislation affects your business and why you support or oppose it.
- Discuss only one issue per telephone call.
- Ask the legislator's position.
  - ✓ If the legislator's position is the same as yours, express agreement and thanks.
  - ✓ If your position differs from the legislator's, politely express disappointment and offer some factual information supporting your views.
- Don't attempt to give "expert" opinions. Tell how legislation would affect your business, based on your experience and knowledge.
- Request that your legislator take a specific action by telling him/her what you desire. State the facts as you see them. Avoid emotional arguments. If you use dollar figures, be realistic.
- Keep all communication friendly and respectful.
- Thank the legislator or aide for his/her time and for considering your views.