



How to Influence Your MP

By Anonymous

Knowledge of politics is key to any successful mobilization, activism, or advocacy. You may have strong opinions about Canada's role in regions of the world where you have served as a volunteer. Or, you may support a specific social or economic development campaign or movement. If you have decided to mobilize, and act on your opinions and convictions, knowing how to talk to and influence politicians—and in particular Members of Parliament (MPs)—can help you influence policy-setting.

Following are tips from a CESO VA who has been active in CESO's public engagement program and who has years of experience in the political arena. The VA knows a lot about how politics works in Canada, and how politicians think. When Public Engagement at CESO asked the VA if he would share some of his expertise with other CESO volunteers and Make Poverty History campaign supporters, he said yes. Below are some guidelines that he shared.

What Does Your Member of Parliament Actually Do?

Your MP spends time in your community (the riding) and in Ottawa. Your MP represents the constituents of his or her riding. Your MP has different responsibilities in Ottawa and the riding.

A. In Ottawa

Monday through Thursday (when the house is sitting) MPs work at a crushing schedule from early morning to late night attending caucus meetings, functions, and hearings, leaving little time for meeting with constituents.

B. In Your Riding

Friday and on weekends the MP spends time in the riding office and at functions and events that will get the name recognition that is key to ongoing political success.

What Motivates Your MP?

As cynical as it may sound, the question at the top of your MP's mind each day is likely, "What will get me re-elected?" Keep this in mind as you research information about your MP and prepare to schedule a meeting:

- What motivates your political representative?
- What does he/she respond to?
- What does your MP do every day?
- What committees does he/she sit on?

- What issues get his/her attention?

How Does the Political Process Work?

A. Message

Local media is the key avenue for your MP to communicate to his/her public. Your MP wants to be seen and heard, since establishing name recognition can help lead to re-election.

B. Membership

"Membership" refers to your MP's process of identifying supporters. Volunteers, donors and constituents are the currency of a politician. Therefore, use numbers of people who have enlisted with your cause to support your case and drive home your point when making an appointment or face-to-face. For example, "Two-hundred people in the community have signed this petition."

C. Money

Running a campaign takes money. If your MP believes that you know or can influence community leaders, an advantage is created. Don't be afraid to use your community affiliations.

D. Cause

It's your cause and your right as a constituent to keep your MP aware of activities that are important to his/her public.

Don't shy away from visiting and engaging your MP. This is your right and what the politician expects of his constituents. Always keeping in mind: what's in it for the MP and his or her political party?

How Can You Contact Your MP?

Find out the name of your MP. Find out the contact details for your MP's Ottawa or constituency office. The on-line search function available on Government of Canada Web site at http://canada.gc.ca/directories/direct_e.html will help you find the information you need. Simply search by name or input your postal code to find out the name of the MP in your area.

When is the Best Time to Reach Your MP?

Friday is the most appropriate time to make an appointment and if that is not possible try to meet at a public event you know your MP will be attending. There is often time to engage while the MP is waiting to perform a ribbon-cutting ceremony or other such duty.

Call the riding office, where generally there are two staff members, and speak to the Executive Assistant (EA).

In asking for the appointment, do not tell your story, simply have a "hook" in the form of message that will get the attention of the EA. Know your goal—getting the 15- to 30-minute appointment is the key to your future success.

Should you be unsuccessful at the constituency level go to the Ottawa level and speak with the Communications Assistant. They will be very familiar with the MP's causes and when a clear message is delivered that addresses one of the MP's hot buttons (message, membership, money), you will most likely be successful.

When all else fails, go to the competition. Your MP's competitor will always like to know what your MP did not want to hear. Naturally this is very effective during an election year.

What Should I Do When My MP Says "Yes" to a Meeting?

Before your meeting

- a. Read the local news. Look for an issue that relates to your cause
- b. Prepare to refer to community group(s) you are a part of, the people you influence.
- c. Check the MP's website and that of his/her party. Know the party's platform and how it relates to your cause.

At the Meeting

Generally, the meeting will start with a little small talk, which provides an opportunity for the MP to gage your "value" and get to know you as a constituent. Remember, the MP is looking for answers to "his/her" questions, "Who do you know?" "How can you help me?"

Don't forget the reason you are there. It's now your turn to steer the meeting in your direction, but ensure that you have the statistics that will get the politician's attention. The number of people involved in the project, the media exposure of the organization and the specific cause you are supporting at the meeting. The financial and human resources that you both represent and influence all contribute to creating a keen interest on the part of your MP. You want this individual to be active in supporting your cause to other MPs and to create recognition.

Finally—the "Ask". Make sure to state clearly what it is you want your MP to do for you and your cause. "And in closing, once again, the reason I am here today is to ask for your support in . . ."

The Wrap-Up

Leave behind material such as an information folder, a brochure, a business card. Follow-up with a handwritten letter simply restating your thanks for the meeting, the hope that you will be able to contact the individual on future issues of interest... leaving the door of communication open.

Ongoing Responsibility

Keep others informed, let the communications department, your team members and key players know how the meeting went and how you plan to proceed with next steps. Let us know about your success.

The prospect of approaching one's MP may be daunting, but the benefits can be great. This toolkit is a simple guide designed to help you along the way so that you embrace the task of communicating with politicians.

For more resources, tools and tips on Public Engagement in support of Canada's role in international development, please visit <http://www.ceso-saco.com/>.