

THE SHOWALTER GROUP, INC.
ROOTS OF SUCCESS
The Resource for Grassroots and PAC Productivity
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In this Issue:

- 2005 Grassroots Innovation Award Winners
- The Best of Innovate to Motivate 2005
- Recommended Reading - "How Full is Your Bucket?"
- Amyism #47



Amy Showalter
Grassroots and PAC
Productivity Expert

- Communicating with Congress - Myth vs. Reality
My interview with Brad Fitch, Deputy Director of the Congressional Management Foundation
- "Keepers" from Innovate to Motivate 2005

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Communicating with Congress - Myth vs. Reality
My interview with Brad Fitch, Deputy Director of the Congressional Management Foundation

Brad Fitch joined CMF in 2001 as Deputy Director. In addition to assisting in the management of CMF, Brad conducts consulting sessions with congressional offices, leads training programs, and coordinates press inquiries. In addition, he was the managing editor of the 108th edition of Setting Course. Prior to joining CMF, Brad worked on Capitol Hill for 12 years in various capacities including: House Press Secretary, House Committee Communications Director, Senate Communications Director, and House Chief of Staff.



Brad Fitch

Brad also is the author of Media Relations Handbook for Agencies, Associations, Nonprofits, and Congress. Prior to working for Congress, Brad worked as a radio and television reporter. He is a member of the adjunct faculty at The American University, where he received a Masters degree in journalism and public affairs. He holds a Bachelors degree in political science from the Johns Hopkins University.

I'm always concerned when we admonish our advocates to engage in a certain method of legislator communication when there's no evidence to support it. The wrong information ultimately discourages future involvement in the legislative and political process. So, in my continual pursuit of the truth, I interviewed Brad Fitch, Deputy Director of the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF).

The Congressional Management Foundation has been conducting research with congressional staff and Members of Congress relative to how they view, process, and respond to constituent communications. The CMF has received grants from the National Science Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust to continue their quest to find out communications "best practices" between congressional offices and their constituents.

Q: What's the mission of the Congressional Management Foundation?

A: The CMF was founded by Members of Congress. There was a sense that many staff members were good communicators, but maybe not great office managers. We serve as consultants to congressional staff on office management techniques, professional development, etc.

We also receive grants to conduct research to improve Congressional communications. One of our first reports from the Congress Online Project, "Email Over

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Group's
Fortune "Power
25"
Grassroots
Benchmarking
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Communicating with Congress - Myth vs. Reality

load in Congress" (2001) was very favorably received, and has led to additional research funding. (see the report at: <http://www.congressonlineproject.org/email.html>)

Q: What's your background?

A: I'm a recovering disc jockey and typical "hill rat" who worked for four congressional offices and held almost every staff job - legislative director, press secretary and chief of staff. I enjoy the people and the institution. I wanted to help change the institution from within by strengthening congressional offices. I also teach communications at American University.

Q: Let's talk about misconceptions between constituents and legislative offices. I delivered a workshop recently where one of the respondents was aghast that he "gave \$1,000.00 to a U.S. Senator and got a form letter in return." Obviously a big misunderstanding on his part. What does your research show to be some of the biggest misunderstandings constituents have about communicating with their Members of Congress?

A: One of them is the misconception about the resources available to a congressional office. I remember explaining to a constituent that there were 35 staff members in a particular U.S. Senate office and 20 were responsible for responding to constituents. This well-meaning individual couldn't comprehend that 20 people would be needed to respond to constituent inquiries.

In the 1990's about one to four percent of the population had communicated with their Member of Congress. Now with the Internet, that number is growing to five to seven percent of the population is communicating with Congress. This puts an extraordinary strain on the resources available to handle those communications.

Constituents also probably underestimate the value of their input. Following the 9/11 attacks and October 2001 anthrax attack, there was a palpable feeling of loss on the Hill with no constituents visiting the congressional offices and no mail. Members of Congress and staff were lonely. Constituent contact and mail is so important to them. The existence of the Congress is based on information; they really depend on hearing from constituents to get direction and know the pulse of their district.

Q: Based on your personal experience and the research, what are some of the "rules" for effective constituent communications?

A: First, citizens have to communicate *with their elected representative*. Many people think that "every member of Congress should be responsive to everyone." Maybe that is appropriate with the Speaker of the House and those in certain leadership positions. However, offices who receive communications from those not in their district simply forward to the office that represents them. Or, in the case of e-mail, it's simply filter out and never reaches anyone in Congress.

Also, letters have to have a clear request or "ask." Simply writing to apprise a representative or senator about a particular issue isn't very effective. And, it's important for a constituent has to answer "why?" in the letter. What's the impact on them personally, as well as on their community and state?

For example, during the 2003 prescription drug benefit campaign, a message from one of the interest groups urged members of Congress to support a "real" prescription drug bill." No specificity or reason behind it, just support a "real" bill.

Q: How do offices prioritize incoming mail? For example, many government relations professionals use a pyramid model that shows how congressional offices prioritize constituent input. It asserts that legislators pay more attention to letters from constituents who have volunteered for their campaign or contributed to their campaign. True or false?

A: I worked on Capitol Hill for four Members of Congress in the House and Senate, and came to know another dozen or so offices quite well. During my four years at the CMF I have worked closely with at least 100 offices. In all that time I have never seen an office capture that data. The only data that some offices capture is whether constituents are registered to vote (but not which party, which is against House rules for them to track.) The other information is illegal for members to collect and possess.

Overall, all members think mail is important. Whether they provide enough resources for their staff to manage their mail is debatable. There isn't a universal application to how it is handled. Some offices create targeted constituent list and keep them informed by being proactive on issues important to those constituents. Others are reactive. They'll ask their staff, "What's the mail running on this?" and then

Communicating with Congress - Myth vs. Reality (continued)

take action. It just varies in degrees and practices of someone in the Senate versus the House.

Q: How do legislators view meetings vs. letters vs. email, etc?

A: Personal meetings and "town hall" type events are frankly more impactful than written correspondence. Staff and lawmakers make a mental calculation of the investment a constituent made to come to Washington D.C., attend a town hall meeting, etc. This doesn't go unnoticed by staff or the legislator.

Q: Since meetings are important, how can constituents have an effective meeting with congressional staff and/or their Member of Congress?

A: 1) They need to be prepared for short meetings. 15-minute meetings are the norm, especially when Congress is in session. It doesn't mean they don't value the issue or the meeting, it just means they have 10 other meetings to attend that day.

2) They need to have a specific ask. Do they want the Member to vote a certain way, to co-sponsor legislation, to join a coalition? Be specific.

3) Briefing materials need to be brief ----under five pages. You'd be depressed if you looked at the basement of one of the House office buildings and saw the amount of paper wasted every day.

4) Follow-up with staff electronically via e-mail with any requested information and of course to say thanks. A Chief of Staff friend of mine told me once, "if you want me to pass on something to the boss, you better give it to me in a format I can cut and paste."

5) Don't bring too many people to the meeting. Offices are very small, especially in the House. Five people is a good number - 10 might be too many.

Q: How can people learn more about your research and help fund it?

A: Our current two year project is entitled "Improving Communications with Congress." We have sponsorship opportunities from \$5,000.00 to \$50,000.00 and there are certain benefits we provide based on the funding level.

Fill out our web form with your request at: <http://www.cmfweb.org/ContactUs.asp>

Amyism #47

Grassroots and PAC Persuasion: "As influence agents, we must learn to think in story, talk in story, and present our arguments in a narrative form. Because story can persuade and inspire where reason and logic and argument fall flat."

-- Kelton Rhoads, Ph.D.

About The Showalter Group, Inc.

The Showalter Group works with associations and corporations that want to increase their grassroots and PAC productivity. We provide highly customized solutions via grassroots consultation, public affairs staff and volunteer training, coaching for public affairs staff, keynote presentations, and grassroots project management.

To book Amy Showalter to speak at your next meeting, or to inquire about our grassroots or PAC consulting services or other products, contact us at:

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2005 Grassroots Innovation Award Winners

American College of Cardiology, IDI/Blue Cross Blue Shield Association are winners of the 2005 Showalter Grassroots Innovation Award

Each year, I partner with my colleagues Peter Kennerdell and Tony Kramer to produce our annual Innovate to Motivate Conference for Political Involvement Professionals. One of the highlights of the conference is our recognition of the most innovative PAC, grassroots and technology programs.

Thanks to the judges, who read, re-read and discussed numerous nominations in the grassroots and technology categories:

- Ann Clayton, ConocoPhillips
- Callie Denton, Kansas Trial Lawyers Association
- Emily Foster, Cummins
- Jennifer Johnson, Pfizer
- Debbie Plummer, Cinergy
- Taryn Rosenkranz, American Academy of Pediatrics
- Catherine Taylor, The Timken Company

And the winners are . . .

Grassroots

American College of Cardiology

Program Manager: Adam Nelson, CAE

The American College of Cardiology developed a program that has captured the attention of policy makers – "Cardiologist for a Day" (CFD). This program has proven to be effective in bringing state legislators, Center for Medicare Services carriers, private carriers, state/local health department administrators, corporate healthcare purchasers and physicians together to discuss healthcare policy.

The ACC program is a bit different than other similar programs in the medical community because it included a broader spectrum of participants, rather than just physicians and legislators.

Policy makers now have a new perspective of how the healthcare system works as well as an expanded network of professional contacts within the medical community. It has also enhanced the visibility and access for the physician to policy makers when important healthcare issues arise.

The ACC produced a CD-ROM "toolkit" that gives the chapter executive or local practice everything they need to execute the program at the local level. In the past, the ACC staff organized and executed the program. The toolkit is specific enough to enable members to follow step-by-step instructions without ACC staff oversight, thus empowering the physician members and allowing ACC staff to pursue additional grassroots objectives.

Amy's Advisory:

The existence of a relationship is one of the prerequisites for effective persuasion. The ACC program allows relationships to start and flourish without any particular "legislative agenda," thus adding to their credibility. To make these events more valuable to the legislator, do what the ACC did and expand the list of those invited so that the legislator can maximize his or her time and reach out to as many stakeholders as possible.

Technology

Issue Dynamics Inc./Blue Cross Blue Blue Shield Association

Program Managers:

- Julie Tippet Simon, Editor, BCBSA
- Cheryl Contee, Senior Consultant, IDI
- Ken Deutsch, Executive Vice President, IDI

The BCBSHealthIssues.com site is created to provide education on public policy issues affecting healthcare coverage. In order to deliver the latest-breaking news, BCBS Health Issues recently launched its own RSS news feeds in June 2004 so that other websites can offer windows with

Continued on next page

auto-updated BCBS headlines on subjects such as Medicare, keeping healthcare affordable and prescription drug re-importation.

RSS-based news feeds are a new way to disseminate breaking news to an organization's audience and keep them up to date on issues that matter to them. It is a cost-effective, low maintenance tool to provide constant freshness and content richness to a site while increasing page views dramatically. In September, BCBS Kansas City referred 22 people to the site. By the end of the pilot program's first month, BCBS Kansas City had become one of the site's top three referrers, sending more than 4,000 visitors to BCBSHealthIssues.com.

Providing RSS news feeds allows other sites to publish your news story, bringing visitors back to your website for more information through each click. BCBSHealthIssues.com now receives at least 10 percent more visitors through the release of the news feeds, and traffic to the website has gone up generally by as much as 30 percent in recent months. Their content appears on other sites without paying licensing and advertising fees, and other sites get the benefit of auto updating news and content.

Amy's Advisory:

For web content to be compelling and persuasive, it needs to be exclusive. If your site contains the same content as other sites and print or electronic media, it simply does not carry the exclusivity necessary for maximum persuasion. The RSS news feeds method helped BCBS stakeholders get information that they normally would not see in traditional print and electronic media.

"Keepers" from Innovate to Motivate 2005

One of the perks of co-producing and hosting the annual conference is that I get to sit in on many of our fantastic workshops. I had numerous "learning moments" of my own this year. Here are some of my favorites:

"Stories and Their Role in Persuasion"

Kelton Rhoads, Ph.D.

Working Psychology

www.workingpsychology.com

"Many psychologists refer to the human mind as a dark stage with a single spotlight of conscious attention. That's why it's smart to have the guy running the spotlight on your payroll."

"How the Right Fit Impacts Your Political Action"

Ron Balmer

Managing Partner

The Gallup Organization

www.gallup.com

"It's not enough to have "satisfied" PAC and grassroots members. To get results, they have to be engaged. What drives your advocacy? What drives your PAC? Find out, and then ask your members if these things are happening."

"How to Outsmart Your Brain"

Marcia Reynolds, MA, M.Ed.

President, Co-Visioning

www.outsmartyourbrain.com

"Being emotionally intelligent means demonstrating "choice." In fact, the root of the word "intelligent" is legere which means "choosing" and "inter" meaning "between." However, before you can choose what emotion would serve you best in a situation, you have to be aware of what you are feeling in the moment and have a sense of why you are feeling that way. Once you know "the why" of an emotion, you have a clearer sense of what you will need to change your emotional state. Becoming intimate with your emotions is the first step to feeling the freedom of choice in your life.

The Best of Innovate to Motivate

One of the core philosophies of Innovate to Motivate is the value of customer feedback. We value the input of experienced grassroots and PAC professionals -- we simply could not produce an effective conference without their guidance.

Our 2005 conference Co-Chairs, Carrie Langdon of International Paper and Carter Headrick of the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, were our able co-pilots this year. Here's an excerpt from their remarks at the opening plenary session of this year's conference:

Carrie: Thank you for being a part of Innovate to Motivate 2005! If you are like me, you are probably here because you looked around and realized that Innovate to Motivate is *truly* innovative.

I think you will enjoy the fact that we take a holistic approach to professional development. Peter, Amy and Tony were the first to offer a well-rounded curriculum that includes disciplines like organizational tips, persuasion, and communication skills that are all fundamental strengths of a successful PAC or grassroots manager.

Being from Washington, DC, I can say that I also like the opportunity to network with and learn from non-DC based industry colleagues who I frankly do not see at other best practices events throughout the year. One of those is my Co-Chairman of this year's Innovate to Motivate conference, Carter Headrick.

Carter: Thanks Carrie!

I think one of the keys to Innovate to Motivate is that our organizers know what good grassroots and PAC work really is. For example, when I spoke last year at the conference, I learned so much from my co-panelist, Susan Goodman of Southwest Airlines. I'm glad to meet the Susan Goodmans and Carrie Langdons of the world at Innovate to Motivate.

I have been to other conferences where the presentations were dominated by vendors and the whole thing ended up feeling like a weeklong sales meeting. That will not happen to you this week!

I have my favorite speakers here at Innovate to Motivate too and those people are the reasons I come to the conference. So stay tuned for Amy and Kelton's sessions.

And frankly, I have a two year old and an eight month old and I just do not get to party like I once did. Hmm. . . Key West. February, no kids I would not miss it for anything! But you will see me at every session – no parties until the sun sets!

Carrie: Amy, Peter and Tony really seek your feedback and incorporate that into future Innovate to Motivate programming. And we have done it again this year. So please let us know what you like, what could be improved, and so forth.

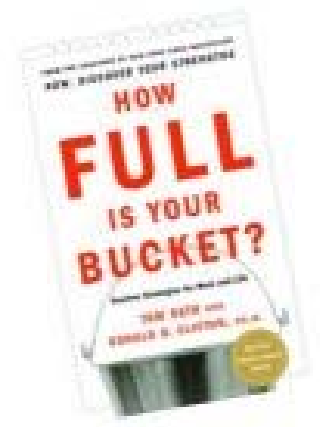
Carter: And, before we continue, we want to thank and recognize the members of our Advisory Committee who help determine conference content, speakers, etc. If you are a member of the Advisory Committee, please stand and let us thank you. Enjoy your Innovate to Motivate experience!

Recommended Reading - "How Full is Your Bucket?"

I'm biased. I believe that Gallup produces some of the most solid, unbiased, bleeding edge management research. I also believe that we as government affairs professionals have a responsibility to encourage and motivate our PAC and grassroots members beyond congratulatory emails and plaques.

I've espoused (and lived) a philosophy of "catching someone doing something right" via the personal touch, and via personal recognition. I've seen it work in the trenches, and always viewed it as a privilege to have the ability to recognize stellar advocates and PAC members. Most of them simply don't get recognized in their daily work tasks.

"How Full is Your Bucket" uses solid research to demonstrate the importance of this approach. You'll learn how the right recognition affects productivity. Government Relations staff who apply this approach are guaranteed to have more motivated and engaged grassroots advocates, PAC members, and yes, even subordinates!



Order "How Full Is Your Bucket?" from Amazon.com