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Congress, Lobbying, Voices

Seven tips for making a lasting impression with members of Congress

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Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

Are some constituents more memorable than others? Do lawmakers and their staff have better mental recall of some constituents and thus inflate their importance? The effectiveness of constituent advocacy is an article of faith in the government relations profession, and in "Civics 101." However, research reveals the more accurate assessment is that perceived constituents matter. According to University of Maryland professor Kristina Miler <https://gvpt.umd.edu/facultyprofile/Miler/Kristina> legislators and their staff do indeed play mental "favorites."

Miler was one of the first researchers to examine how "political and legislative elites" use heuristics to recall information presented by constituents. Heuristics are mental shortcuts, and their use is rooted firmly in the psychological science literature. Heuristics are an efficient way to make decisions (although there are, of course, disadvantages to this approach). Legislators and their staff are no different than the rest of us humans when it comes to using mental shortcuts.

The Reality of Mental Shortcuts

"All humans make snap judgments, and the busier people get, the more they rely on these snap judgments," says my colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads, who teaches influence psychology at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California. "People revere these decisions when they refer to having 'a gut feeling' and 'an excellent sense of intuition.' Come to think of it, when have you ever heard anyone say they don't have excellent intuitive ability? Everybody has awesome intuitive powers; just ask if you doubt it.

In our culture, we are uniquely set against the concepts of 'bias' and 'prejudice,'" Dr. Rhoads continues. "But in point of fact, all human brains function on the basis of 'bias,' which consists of thinking of shortcuts that allow us to arrive at a decision without a lot of mental effort and on the basis of applying past learning and judgments to present situations."

For good and ill, bias and prejudice are efficient. Humans are indeed cognitive misers, and powerful people are no different. "They are perhaps even less reflective than average," says Rhoads, "because they're generally overwhelmed with time constraints and social pressures."

Miler was inspired to research this topic after ruminating on a question posed by political scientist Richard Fenno in 1978, and which all advocacy group leaders should consistently ask themselves when contemplating their grassroots brand: "What does the representative see when he or she goes home to look at the represented?"

Miler conducted research with 41 congressional offices. Her team interviewed 80 legislative staff who were responsible for environmental or health care issues. The study sample of offices was selected to reflect the current political party, seniority, region and committee membership structures. She asked staff open-ended questions about who they viewed as relevant constituencies on these issues. She also interviewed select Members of Congress to affirm that their views were consistent with their staff.

According to Miler's research featured in her book *Constituency Representation in Congress: The View from Capitol Hill* (Cambridge University Press), the picture in legislators' minds of the constituents they represent is in fact "limited and flawed" thanks to mental shortcuts that determine who they "see" and "don't see." She concludes that despite the best intentions, "cognitive limitations" prevent legislators from fully representing their districts.

What Does the Legislator "See" When Looking at Constituents? - The Characteristics of Memorable Constituents

Miler argues that, above all, two factors will greatly increase the likelihood that a sub constituency is remembered by the legislative office: regular contact and money.

The financial aspect should not, according to Miler, be confused with the quid pro quos that animate campaign finance reform enthusiasts. Miler is not suggesting that Capitol Hill is swarming with undetected bribery experts. She believes that the "financial contributions shape the pre-conscious stage of representation and can have a corrupting influence on constituency representation even when legislators are not active accomplices." In other words, it's natural to remember people who invested in your career via a campaign contribution, but that doesn't translate to being an accomplice to bribery.

How Can You Make Your Messages Memorable?

Please remember as you review this list that it relates to information recall only - it is only one part of the persuasion puzzle. (Of which my colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads has determined there are not "6 easy principles" or "10 tips", but rather about 100 tactics you can use depending on the situation and influence prospect. Successful influence is customized.)

- Money. Are your stakeholders who participate financially in the political system a part of your grassroots community?
- Pursue consistent contact, particularly vivid (translation: proximity) contact.
- Frequently presented information is more easily recalled.
- Familiarity of the issue as it relates to major constituent groups is more easily recalled.
- How can you demonstrate that your organization is an important group in the district?
- Issue salience. The more prominent the issue, the more it is, in the researcher's words, "overvalued" by staff, which is why it's more easily remembered. How can you best position your issue, particularly in key legislative districts?
- Pre-existing attitudes and values. Is the information being presented consistent with the staffer's belief system? If it fits with the staffer's confirmation bias, they judge the information as more important and also overvalue it. (This explains why staff and legislators who encounter town hall meeting protestors view them as "trolls" if they disagree with them, and "authentic advocates" when they reinforce their issue positions. This applies to the left with the Tea Party and the right with ACA supporters)
- Numbers matter. The number of constituents affected in each district makes staff more likely to recall issue information. Know who is impacted, where they are, and how to engage them.

The bottom line. . . . The human mind operates the same whether you are a lawmaker, legislative staffer, or grassroots influencer. People use heuristics to recall information, because it makes life easier. And busy, harried "legislative elites" probably resort to heuristics more than others, simply because of the volume of information they must filter. Do their thinking for them. Position and present your information in a way that makes recall easy.

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