

7 Mistakes to Avoid when Requesting a Meeting

Mistake #1 – Non-Constituency: When requesting a meeting, whether with the congressional member or a staff person, the first question you will be asked is “Are you from the district or state?” Elected officials and their staff are there to represent a discreet group of people - CONSTITUENTS. You absolutely must demonstrate that you are a constituent or you will not get a meeting. The request letter should always include the city of the constituent asking for the meeting – and some offices will ask for a full street address just to be sure!

Mistake #2 – Non-Written Requests: Actually the first thing you will be asked by the usually incredibly young person who answers the phone is “Have you sent your request in writing?” Don’t even bother to call before you have either faxed in the request (found in the [United States Congress Handbook](#), or <http://www.congress.org>) or e-mailed it through the Congressman’s website (accessible through www.house.gov and www.senate.gov).

Mistake #3 – Assumption: Never assume that your faxed or e-mailed request actually got to the office or that the scheduler will just magically get back to you. With hundreds of requests to go through a day, things get lost. Be sure to follow-up (and be very polite – they don’t lose things on purpose, they’re just overwhelmed).

Mistake #4 – Member-itis: Never insist that a meeting with a congress member is more important than a meeting with a staff person. In fact, it’s actually better to meet with the staff person, who has the time to listen and prepare your issue for the congressperson. You might also consider inviting a member of Congress to your conference or facility so everyone can meet a legislator. It is much easier to meet with a legislator in-district than Washington, DC!

Mistake #5 – Inflexibility: This is particularly a problem when it’s combined with high expectations. Too many groups offer a very small meeting window and then are irritated when staff or members are not available in the 12:00pm to 2:00pm time slot they’ve designated for meetings. Try to have an entire day available – and ask participants in your lobby day to bring a good book.

Mistake #6 – Overzealousness: If you have multiple people coming from one district or state, do everything you can to coordinate before requesting meetings. In many cases, each individual will request their own meeting. By the fifth meeting on the same topic, the staff can get pretty cranky. They will thank you for your consideration of their time if you coordinate well.

Mistake #7 – Abandonment: Once you are done in Washington, DC or your state capitol, your advocacy for the year isn’t finished. In fact, it’s just started! In most cases you will need to work with the office on an ongoing basis to help them truly understand your issue and the impact on their constituents. So, after your meeting, don’t abandon your elected officials and their staff – stay in touch and keep your issue at the forefront!

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