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For More Information:
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Effective Communication with Legislators

Well-informed, knowledgeable members of Congress are better able to act in a way that benefits everyone. Furthermore, members clearly want as much information as possible on issues that are of importance to them and have come to rely in particular on constituents to provide it. A communication from a constituent will always merit the attention of a legislator.

The goal of communicating with lawmakers is to inform the member of Congress of its problem and persuade that member to take appropriate action. Obviously, the skills of advocacy and negotiation are involved. There are certain basic principles that have proven to be very effective in handling legislative matters. These principles are not necessarily original. In fact, many involve good old-fashioned common sense. Unfortunately, however, the basics are sometime overlooked.

Remember, you have the right to communicate to legislators and state your views, just like the right to vote. However, it must be exercised, and legislators cannot translate the views of their constituents into legislative action unless they know what those views are.

Writing to Legislators

Writing to legislators is one of the most effective means of communicating with elected officials. When a legislator receives fifteen letters from a constituent on an issue, he or she knows that there are probably more constituents that feel the same way and takes that into consideration when developing a position on issues. The following are tips on writing to legislators.

- Write on your company stationary. It is important for lawmakers to see that your company is located in his or her district.
- While it is preferable to email or fax your letter due to security concerns, you may also wish to send a hard copy version as reinforcement. When doing so, you may either send it to your member's local office or to their Washington office at one of the following addresses:

When writing to Members of the Senate

The Honorable (name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

When writing to Members of the House

The Honorable (name)
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

- Identify the bill or legislative issue. Give the bill number or the popular title, if possible.
- Identify yourself and mention the state, legislative district, and the city or county in which you are a voter.

- Be knowledgeable. If you feel strongly about a particular bill, the force of your feelings combined with thorough knowledge of the issue can make your communication more effective.
- Describe your concerns clearly. Legislators handle many issues – make sure you differentiate your topic of concern.
- Keep it short and to the point. Time is valuable and a concise letter will get better attention. A typewritten letter should not be longer than one page and a handwritten no longer than two pages. Quality, not quantity, will get a legislator's attention.
- Communicate in your own words. Demonstrate how the legislation will affect your company and your employees.
- Present the best argument. End by asking for consideration of your position. A communication from a concerned constituent will always merit the attention of a legislator.
- Be polite. Never threaten or argue. After a vote is taken, it is valuable to write your lawmaker again, either thanking them for their vote or politely explaining both that you regret that they did not and your thanks for their willingness to consider your views.

Communicating by telephone

- U.S. Capitol Switchboard (202) 224-3121
- Senate and House – Status of Legislation (202) 225-1772
- Phone calls can be an extremely effective means of grassroots communication. If the legislator is unable to speak to you, be sure to let the staff person you are speaking with know that you want to leave a message. Your views and opinions will be registered and staff will tabulate the issue of the calls for the legislator. The number of calls received on an issue can affect how a legislator casts a vote.
- If the legislator is unavailable, ask to speak to the legislative assistant handling the issue for the member. Identify yourself and state the issue, the bill number and brief message. For example, "Please tell Senator Thune that I called to oppose H.R. 3448 to increase the minimum wage because it would have serious economic impacts and could result in layoffs. Could you please tell me the Senator's position on the issue? If not, I would appreciate it if he would write me to let me know where he stands."
- Know what you will say. Prior to your call, prepare talking points outlining the points you want to make.
- Refer to the legislation by bill number. Legislators consider hundreds of bills each session – it is important to let them know the specific bill you are calling about.
- Follow up with a written letter keeping in mind the tips above. A written letter on company stationery should be prepared citing the day you called, the person with whom you spoke, and the issues you discussed. Always request a response to your letter.