
Insider's Bulletin

Produced for Capitol Advantage by the Congressional Management Foundation
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Communicating with Capitol Hill: How Technology is Changing Information Processes in Congressional Offices

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Volume 1 of the *Insider's Bulletin*, the first in a series of short reports on new trends in communicating with Congress and congressional operations. This *Bulletin* is produced by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF). CMF has a unique status with congressional offices as the only research organization and management advisor that Members of Congress and staff utilize on a regular basis to improve congressional operations. The *Insider's Bulletin* is based on CMF's ongoing research to identify how congressional offices are using technology to process communications from constituents and interest groups. This report is meant to help those that interact with Congress improve their communications practices, creating greater efficiency for the senders (you), and the receivers (congressional offices).

E-MAIL VOLUMES TO CAPITOL HILL

As more Americans go online, e-mail messages to Congress continue to rise. In 1999, the House of Representatives received over 30 million inbound e-mails, including those sent directly to e-mail addresses and through Web forms, from constituents and non-constituents alike. The total volume for 2003 (projected using 10 months of data) is estimated to climb to over three times that amount: 94 million inbound e-mails. Last month, the House alone was processing an average of 815,000 incoming e-mails per day.

Despite the large amount of e-mail still reaching Capitol Hill, the increase seems to be stabilizing in the last two years. Whereas the volume of inbound e-mail increased 78% from 2000 to 2001, there is only a projected increase of approximately 8% from 2002 to 2003. One of the reasons this volume has stabilized is that many online grassroots campaigns have improved their practices. Congressional offices are reporting to us that the most effective campaigns are:

- Targeting individuals' own Members of Congress - and only their own Members of Congress (instead of the whole institution);
- Encouraging people to speak in their own words and personalize their communications;
- Avoiding the sending of duplicate messages from the same person (especially via different communications methods); and
- Providing complete identification information, including name, address, zip code, and e-mail address.

These practices have ensured that e-mails are being read and responded to by the intended recipient and not lost in a sea of online communications. As one legislative assistant told us, "If you want us to be responsive to your campaign, don't send it in a way that annoys us."

While the volume of e-mail congressional offices receive remains daunting to staff, offices appear to be improving their ability to handle the volume. One explanation is that companies (including Capitol Advantage) can seamlessly integrate their e-mail messages with correspondence management tools in use on Capitol Hill. Increasingly, offices are setting up their systems to automatically log in e-mails, instead of printing them out for manual data entry, resulting in a decrease in the workload of Hill staff. Due in part to the ease of processing, managing, and responding to e-mail messages, e-mail is rapidly becoming the preferred means of communication in Congress.

COMMUNICATING WITH COMMITTEES

When a bill is in committee, it can be difficult for citizens to provide their input. Very few committees have service-oriented staff members dedicated to serving citizens, and even fewer committees have correspondence management systems (CMS) to process public feedback efficiently. In addition, congressional committees usually restrict input on legislation to Members and a select group of witnesses before hearings.

We're seeing a shift in how committees interact with the public, however. More committees are opening up their proceedings with innovative Web sites, streaming audio and video, and accepting comments via e-mail. Recent data shows that approximately half of all committees in the House and Senate -- including majority and minority offices and special and joint committees -- provide a public e-mail address or a Web-based form online.

One committee that not only allows public feedback, but encourages it, is the House Committee on Education and the Workforce (<http://edworkforce.house.gov>). In the past, the Committee has provided online initiatives to develop and reform legislation with citizen input. The "Great IDEAs" initiative solicited feedback from teachers, parents, and others on the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The committee also asked for feedback on the Higher Education Act and received 3,000 responses.

If a committee does not accept comments via public e-mail, there are other ways to communicate electronically. From a grassroots perspective, constituents of those Members on the committee become key to an effective campaign, since their messages will be accepted by the Member's personal office, while non-constituent messages usually will not. And while Members often receive input from their constituents on floor votes, online campaigns on committee and subcommittee votes are less common and, as such, have the potential of making an impact if a sufficient number of constituents participate. In addition, committee staff regularly provide e-mail address to groups and lobbyists; however, that is only likely to occur if a working relationship has already been established, either through a meeting or phone call.

USE OF BLACKBERRYS BY MEMBERS AND STAFF

Prior to September 11, 2001, approximately 9% of Members of Congress were using BlackBerrys, the wireless handheld device that allows users to send and receive e-mail. Because this tool was critical to emergency communications when other methods failed on 9/11, all House Members were subsequently issued BlackBerrys and private e-mail addresses. The number of Members using this device is now estimated at approximately 80%. Almost all Chiefs of Staff and other senior-level staff are using BlackBerrys, too. In some congressional offices, the entire staff have BlackBerrys, primarily for contingency planning purposes.

House Members (and their staff) are more accessible than at any other point in the last 20 years. Members can now communicate to staff and others from anywhere: press conferences, committee hearings, Members-only briefings – even the House floor. Chiefs of Staff have reported that Members' BlackBerry use is leading more Members to communicate with their staff electronically. It seems that the introduction of this technology has changed the way Members and their offices operate, and as their comfort and skill level with technology increases, could lead to other changes in IT use as well.

WEB SITES AND ELECTRONIC INFORMATION FOR LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH

Another way advocacy organizations are influencing Congress is through their Web sites. Web sites are the preferred source for legislative research, and congressional staff are increasingly relying on special interest group sites for policy information. Doing their research online is quick and convenient for the time-crunched congressional staffer. As one Chief of Staff stated, "If you want your message to get in front of my boss, give it to me in a format I can cut and paste."

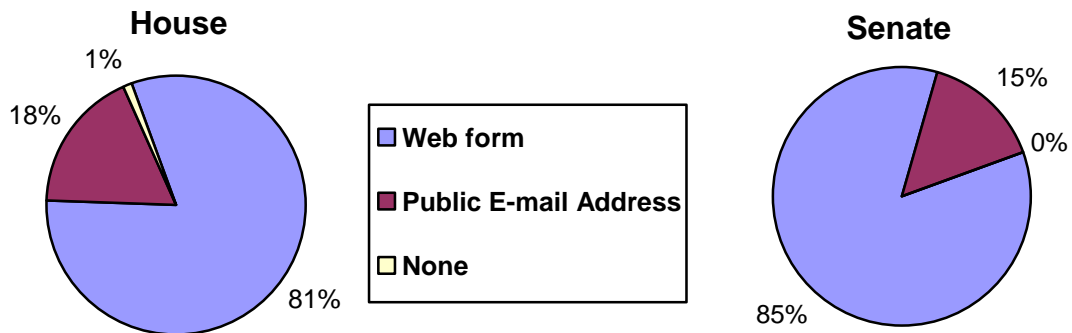
Staff also visit a wide range of non-profit, union, association, corporation, and advocacy Web sites in their legislative issue areas. They go to these sites to:

- Research an organization's position on an issue;
- Find data and information they can use in speeches, letters, and briefing materials;
- Learn what information the organization is providing its members;
- Discover what action they are encouraging their members to take; and
- Research the organization before its members meet with the Senator or Representative.

Since each legislative staffer has a different portfolio of issue areas, the sites they use regularly vary widely. However, staff tend to visit (and re-visit) sites that are up-to-date and have content targeted to their needs, such as "hot issues," "legislative issues," or "Member Alert" sections. In one focus group CMF conducted with House Chiefs of Staff, participants suggested that every organization that communicates with Capitol Hill would be wise to have a special section of the Web site that was designed specifically for congressional staff needs.

CAPITOL HILL NEWS YOU CAN USE

- *Offices Turning Off E-mail, Turning On Web Forms* -- The overwhelming majority of House and Senate offices are turning off their public e-mail addresses and turning to Web-based forms instead. Eighty-five Senators and 81% House Members are now directing constituents to their Web sites to send messages. Web forms allow congressional offices to prioritize constituent communications by reducing: the amount of spam reaching Member offices, the administrative burden of manual data entry, and the amount of time it takes to reply to the message.



- *Use of Congressional E-newsletters Growing* -- The House of Representatives recently announced two important decisions regarding e-mail newsletters: the revision of its franking rules and the approval of a listserv service, which enables offices to easily send mass e-mails. The Senate also offers a similar listserv service. The House and Senate franking rules allow offices to send e-newsletters to anyone who subscribes to their list, and do not subject e-newsletters to mass mailing restrictions. Combined with the listserv capabilities, we predict congressional online communications will rapidly change. More and more congressional offices will be sending e-newsletters to communicate with their constituents on a more frequent basis.

Insider's Bulletin is produced for Capitol Advantage LLC (www.capitoladvantage.com)
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