

A photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C., featuring its iconic dome and neoclassical architecture, set against a clear blue sky with some trees in the foreground.

FIVE MINUTES WITH YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Navigating Your Next Washington Fly-in

Ed Barks

**Five Minutes with Your Member of Congress:
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Opening Statement

The pandemic changed Capitol Hill and how its denizens interact with the public. Although matters with regard to Congressional [fly-ins](#) have now largely reverted to the “before times,” one particular vestige of the coronavirus days remains — remote visits with members of Congress; or as I like to call it, the Zoom-in.

What does this mean for you and your grassroots activists? Smart organizations realize that a two-prong approach is necessary to get their advocates up to speed on both in person and remote Congressional visits. You may encounter offices that prefer video meetings, so preparation for a Zoom-in demands attention. This means more preparation and work since you now have potentially two formats to deal with.

Let’s look at the positive side. Advocates who are unable to travel to the nation’s capital can now add their voices. This is no small advantage.

The video conference option also offers more flexibility. While tapping into the enthusiasm generated by a date-specific fly-in is a plus, now you can also schedule meetings over a longer period, perhaps a week or two, since your grassroots won’t need to worry about extended travel and lodging expenses. An added — and not insignificant — bonus: You may discover that you are able to reach more Hill offices this way.

In light of these benefits, you may want to consider a hybrid type of lobby day — part face-to-face, part remote. This will expand your advocacy bench strength and, therefore, your reach with policymakers.

To take advantage, I should once again emphasize that this augurs more effort as you prepare for your visits. You ignore the need for training specific to this new structure at the peril of your public policy initiatives. How can you best manage the changed landscape?

Hold a series of briefings to familiarize your advocates with the technology on the platform you intend to use. The [consultant you bring on board](#) should be able to organize this. If you plan to utilize Zoom, for example, arrange a mock Hill visit using that exact same system. Not every advocate may have used every service. Some may be accustomed to Zoom, for instance, while others have worked primarily with Microsoft Teams or another tool. And assuredly,

some of your campaigners will prove clumsy with the technology. The point here is to let everyone get the bugs out of their system as best they can before engaging in the real deal.

Capitol Hill offices have generally become familiar with video conferencing specifics, though there are gaps (witness [Sen. Tom Carper's profanity-laden outburst](#) when he had problems connecting during the testimony of Postmaster General Louis DeJoy in August 2020). Yet most offices have thankfully gained a degree of fluency with the technology.

Despite recent developments, many of the traditional ways of conducting lobby days endure:

- Preparing your advocates and providing training programs remains vital
- Crafting a [magnetic message](#) capable of persuading policymakers still matters
- Detail about what to expect from Congressional members and staff continues to be an important factor
- Rolling with the tide when schedules go awry is a must
- Debriefing your advocates after the fact is as critical as ever

All of this is to say that the steps outlined in this paper still need to be reinforced — whether you communicate in person or remote — if you maintain any hope of attaining your public policy goals.

Section 1. Basics of Capitol Hill Advocacy

You may work for a Fortune 1000 corporation, an Inc. 500 business, or a large association. No matter your legal structure, government plays a large role in what you can and cannot do. Your success often hinges on your public policy efforts. And success inside the Beltway doesn't come easy.

This guide is intended to aid government relations experts who prepare grassroots advocates for Capitol Hill fly-ins and Zoom-ins.

The Washington, D.C., [fly-in](#), whether conducted in person or remote, represents a time-tested method for corporate employees and association members — be they CEOs, doctors, financial services experts, or union members — to persuade public officials.

Some organizations prepare their grassroots advocates flawlessly, with verbal suits of armor like knights of old going into battle. Others, sadly, send them into competition on Capitol Hill with what amounts to cardboard swords and plastic shields.

The intent of this paper is to provide government relations experts with practical guidance designed to improve the odds of success for your next Washington lobby day. Successful organizations and individual advocates are constantly on the lookout for ways to heighten their capabilities. Toward that end, ask yourself two questions of your efforts:

1. Do I prepare my grassroots advocates adequately?
2. What can I do to improve our routine?

I strongly advise you to take a hard look at both questions, even if your response to query number one is “Yes.” No matter how proficient we may be at any task, we can always improve. This guide is intended to help you do just that.

Section 2. Preparation

Advocates must be equipped and energized to deal with lawmakers. Let's face it, this is not familiar territory for the vast majority of individuals. Most of your activists are more accustomed to dealing with customers, co-workers, or competitors than with people who practice politics every minute of every day.

§201. Confident Advocates

The fact is a good number of people lack the necessary skills and are intimidated by the manners and morals of Capitol Hill. Confident, knowledgeable advocates prove capable of persuading members of Congress as well as other policymakers such as federal and state regulators, state legislators, and local government officials.

There is no one who delivers more of a punch than someone from back home (short of a well-heeled campaign contributor). In fact, a 2014 [report by the Congressional Management Foundation](#) cites one Congressional scheduler as saying, “Constituents from our district take top priority over any other type of request.” Grassroots visits to Capitol Hill have the power to deliver your message with impact.

In simplest terms, two prime communications tools are required when climbing the Hill:

1. A magnetic message that is consistent.
2. The communications skills to deliver it.

If preparations for your activists focus on only two areas, let it be those two.

§202. Your Magnetic Message

One of the first orders of business is [organizing a strategy session](#) that covers pertinent legislation, your message, and the logistics of your Capitol Hill visits.

A magnetic message forms the centerpiece of sound advocacy efforts, and should be a prominent part of your preparations. Pull your communications strategy consultant into the effort as they should be skilled at message development (be sure to confirm this before you sign on the dotted line).

Devote plenty of time to having your advocates **internalize** your message so that they can **verbalize** it readily. Assign a member of your communications staff or your consultant to walk your advocates through a one-page messaging document that sets forth your four main points, each undergirded by bullets supporting your contention (NB: This one-pager is for your internal use only; do not share it with Congressional offices or other external entities).

Below are some items likely to appear on the agenda for your grassroots training session:

- Review legislation you support or oppose.
- Walk through the messaging you plan to use in support of your argument.
- Discuss any pertinent media coverage, both traditional and digital.
- Conduct Hill visit simulations.
- Take an online tour of the Capitol complex.
- Cover how you plan to follow up on your fly-in efforts.

A few words about recording practice sessions on video. Do it. Few methods advance learning like seeing oneself on video, accompanied by honest and supportive critique.

As you practice, pair some of your fly-in veterans with the less experienced and hold a simulated meeting with one of their elected officials. This exercise is particularly effective when you assign a couple of members of your government relations staff to portray the member of Congress and a staffer. And don't forget to review the video immediately thereafter for learning moments.

§203. Get Everyone on the Same Page

Your goal for your Hill visit campaign may be to gin up support for a particular piece of legislation. Or you may have your eye on scuttling a proposal that threatens your industry, membership, or livelihood. Then again, you may be at the beginning stages, working to cultivate relationships with policymakers who are important to your goals.

Your grassroots activists need a working knowledge of any legislation that affects your organization. Teach them what any proposed law intends to do; how it affects you, your customers, or your members; and why you think it is good or bad. Keep in mind: Never overload them with information under any circumstances. They do not need to be familiar with every jot and tittle of the bill; that's a job for the government relations staff. The out-of-towners' role is to share stories about the real world impact back home.

Empower them with a working knowledge of certain key substantive facts:

- What bills are pending before key committees?
- What pertinent legislation has just been tossed into the hopper?
- Which specific section of an omnibus bill do you need to bring to the attention of your elected representatives?
- What similar legislation failed to pass previous Congresses?
- Are there any efforts in the works to revive those failed bills?
- What political dynamics do I need to consider? For example, would it help or hurt my cause to state that Senator X supports our stance?

Other questions to consider: Who are the players? How do they fit into the Hill hierarchy? What previous interactions have they had with your organization? Who is for us? Who is against us? Who is sitting on the fence? What is the member's level of knowledge on your issue — is it their specialization or do they know next to nothing?

What other specifics would you be wise to consider during your preparation phase? Make it a point to familiarize your troops with any love/hate relationships with lawmakers or Hill staff. On the positive side, you may deal with a senator who consistently supports your viewpoint

or a committee staffer who routinely feeds your government relations staff reliable information. On the other hand, you need to know whether your organization has crossed swords with the chairman or ranking minority member of a committee or with one of their minions.

§204. Pairing Your Advocates

As noted earlier, experienced advocates have an important role to play in helping you to achieve your public policy goals: Guiding your first-timers. Let these veteran operatives shine by taking on some type of mentoring relationship, formal or informal. This helps you on two fronts. First and most obvious, it cultivates a new crop of seasoned advocates. Second — and I would argue of equal importance — you help these experienced individuals enhance their reputations and résumés, in effect taking a bow in front of their colleagues.

Make sure everyone plays a role when visiting your elected officials, even the greenest of advocates. For instance, one member of your party may be charged with opening and closing the meeting, another with covering issue A, and a third person with discussing issue B. Never let anyone fade into the background. If someone is present, they must be present for a reason.

Dividing efforts among more than one individual also allows for better note taking during your Hill meetings. While one person is talking, the others should be jotting down notes. Record not only what was said. Also note nonverbal signals your officeholders display. Consider whether the representative started going through that stack of papers on the desk when the topic turned to issue A, but refocused attention on you when you raised issue B. Did he or she frown or harrumph at a crucial point? Or did you instead witness a smile, nod, and forward lean?

While on the subject of [nonverbals](#), don't forget to ask your consultant to school your advocates on how to make the most of their nonverbal abilities during these visits. With regard to Video tools — the way you look — use appropriate gestures and facial expressions, maintain solid eye contact, know how to display any props, and face the representative as directly as possible (with the realization that seating arrangements may not be optimal in some situations).

One important reminder for [remote meetings](#) is to maintain rock solid eye contact with your camera. The tendency is to look at the screen, but this lessens eye contact. It takes some practice, so build this into your preparation phase.

As for Audio tools — the way you sound — vary the vocal pitch, volume, and rate as this makes one sound both more interesting and interested. It also tends to elevate the overall enthusiasm level.

Another type of pairing also merits mention, this one external: Coalition building. By combining efforts with like-minded groups, you can stretch your resources, both financial and human. Having more bodies means you can schedule appointments with more legislators. And having more than one party involved allows you to soften the impact on your budget.

There may even be occasions when you find it beneficial to join forces with a habitual antagonist. Though relatively rare, libertarians and progressives, to cite one example, can surprise themselves by advocating for the identical cause. Witness the debate over immigration reform when the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Service Employees International Union spent roughly the same amount on advertising in one quarter — on the same side of the issue.

§205. Representing Your Organization

Emblazon upon your advocates' minds that throughout their Hill visits they represent your organization and its interests. They must resist any temptation to freelance, bending policymakers' ears with pet issues. They are in the nation's capital on your dime or participating using your Zoom account, and thus have a responsibility to raise strictly organizational issues.

Some of your advocates are no doubt unfamiliar with the ways of Capitol Hill. To help acclimate them, suggest that they put themselves in a lawmaker's shoes. For instance, understand that schedules on the Hill are in a constant state of flux and often out of an individual lawmaker's control.

What does this volatility mean to your messengers? That scheduled 15-minute meeting may be cut to a 15-second trot to the elevator alongside the representative or senator, or a video call trimmed to a few short minutes with little to no notice. This brings to mind two important points. Number one, roll with the punches. Don't take umbrage should this happen. It's nothing personal, just a fact of life on the Hill. Second, make the most of that unexpectedly condensed time frame by [honing your message](#) to a fine point. Always be prepared to deliver the most important information in a tightly compressed time span.

Also impress upon them the need for a thoroughly ethical approach. It may be useful to cite the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) Association Lobbyist Professional Guidelines, which state in part, "The association lobbyist professional will always deal in accurate, current and factual information, whether it is being reported to the employer or client, government officials, the media or professional colleagues. Truthfulness and honesty are guiding principles in the presentation of information to others and the association lobbyist professional will not engage in misrepresentation of any nature."

§206. Welcome to Washington

Some of your new envoys may not only be unfamiliar with Capitol Hill, they may have never before set foot in Washington, D.C. The fact is this is an impressive place, so it is only natural to be awestruck by the surroundings. I've been a creature of our nation's capital for more than three decades, and am not ashamed to admit being spellbound to this day by the sight of the Capitol dome.

The perception of Capitol Hill (one that has been assiduously cultivated both by members of Congress and, yes, government relations professionals) is that of a stage built to a grand scale with larger than life players.

The reality? It is nothing more than an office building with harried employees just like the ones your advocates work with every day back home. Yes, the hallways are a bit wider, the marble more prevalent, and the ceilings higher. But in the end, whether you visit the Russell Senate Office Building, the Rayburn House Office Building, or any of the other facilities, these are simply office buildings, so don't be intimidated.

§207. Tell Your Stories

Entrancing stories are not just for kids. We all love tales told well. This means you should encourage your advocates to craft their own stories about your issues. That's why they are here — not just to recite passages from legislation, but to show the impact of your views on the folks back home.

Few things can sway a member of Congress like news of how their actions affect lawmakers' constituents. Develop 15-second, 60-second, and five-minute versions. Why these three formats? Just think about some of the likely encounter scenarios:

- 15 seconds: You have just been informed your senator has to hurry to the floor for a vote, scrubbing your scheduled meeting. Your opportunity to get their ear now boils down to a harried 15-second hallway chat.
- 60 seconds: Representative X's staff is ushering a merry-go-round of constituents into the office. As a result, it turns out you have only one minute with the great solon before being turned over to a staffer. Make it count.
- Five minutes: Your senator cannot attend the meeting due to a last minute conflict, but the legislative director has cleared five minutes for you. You had best make the most of every second, for meetings with senior staff are like gold.

Your grassroots advocates can also enliven the conversation and reinforce your case by salting your message with case studies, third party endorsements, survey results, numbers, and a plethora of other techniques. The point to remember: A powerful message involves avoidance of a dry recitation of facts, so add some spark to everyone's remarks.

§208. Extending Your Reach

You may also want to consider alerting important [media](#) outlets to your organization's presence on Capitol Hill. Send them a news advisory and use digital media channels to detail such basics as the date of your visit and any time you have set aside for [media availabilities](#).

Get your advocates in on the action, too. Supply them with a news release template they can use with their local media. In many parts of the country, going to the nation's capital is a big deal that is readily picked up for a "local leader goes to Washington" story.

Urge them to broadcast news of their visit — again, be it in person or remote — on their digital media channels, furnishing them with web links, your digital media handles, and hashtags to use.

After the fact, send out a news release highlighting your accomplishments. Include a list of the names, affiliations, and titles of your delegation. While this may not gin up huge coverage among inside-the-Beltway media, reporters back home are likely to find it of more interest.

Note that media outreach is not advisable for every round of Hill visits. There are some issues you will want to keep below the radar. Plot your [media strategy](#) in advance with your communications experts.

Section 3. Petitioning Your Members of Congress

The big day has dawned. Today is the day you venture to Capitol Hill or prepare to smile into your video camera to plead your case before members of Congress. Let's cover a bit of Capitol Hill protocol to help you center your advocates.

§301. Climb those Marble Stairs

Tell your emissaries to treat their arrival on the Hill as if they were going to the airport to catch a flight. Arrive early and expect delays. The same principle applies to video visits. Log in at least 30 minutes early and use it as a last minute refresher with your advocates. If you do so, be sure not to invite the member of Congress and their staff into the meeting until you've finished your internal discussions.

Logistics are important. You don't want to waste precious time getting lost going from appointment to appointment. You should spend a short amount of time during your training

session on the layout of Capitol Hill, the best routes between the House and Senate, and how to use the tunnels connecting the buildings on each side.

Depending on the day and time, they may need to wait in line, which may extend outdoors. Thus, it makes sense to check the weather forecast ahead of time just in case an umbrella becomes a necessity. Arriving at meetings dripping wet will not shape a positive first impression. A good idea to avoid the longest lines is to steer your crew to lesser-used entrances for the office building where the first visit takes place whenever possible.

Remember that your grassroots envoys deserve more than a map and a pat on the back. Tell them not to hesitate to ask for aid charting routes between appointments. This will prove a real time saver and could help preclude missed appointments. Staff and Capitol Police are generally happy to provide direction.

Advise them to expect security screening by Capitol Police. They should be prepared to empty pockets of keys, mobile devices, pens, eyeglasses, and anything else that might set off the magnetometer.

Once inside, make sure everyone looks presentable. Duck into a restroom and check a mirror to ensure a solid first impression. There is no point in showing up with windblown hair or a piece of spinach between your teeth from your breakfast omelet. Follow this same advice for remote meetings.

While this probably does not need to be said, dress in crisp business attire. Yes, even for video conferencing. Dress exactly as you would as if you were going to Capitol Hill. Avoid shorts and bunny slippers on your lower half. Professional attire from head to toe makes you both look better and perform more proficiently. These are among the most important business meetings you will ever attend, so treat them as such no matter the format.

§302. Crossing the Threshold

Now, off to that first appointment. Your advocates are likely feeling somewhat nervous. That simply means they are normal. The trick is to transform that nervousness into positive energy by reminding them that they are the experts with regard to the issues at hand. Today represents a positive opportunity to educate and motivate key policymakers. Also tell them to bear in mind that members of Congress work for them.

It is important to prepare them for one basic question that a member of Congress might ask: “What brings you here today?” Though it may be hard to believe, this simple phrase baffles many an individual. Your troops need a concise answer (in the neighborhood of 10 seconds) that tees up the discussion and puts them on track with your message.

From the moment your advocates enter the meeting, diplomacy is obligatory. While they must muster the discipline to promote your issues without reserve or hesitation, they should also remain sensitive to the member of Congress and their needs. What's in it for the policymaker? Can you invite them to a hometown event that could do them some good? Might you be able to help out on another issue? Politics is known as a "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" game, so you should be willing to provide support, when appropriate, in addition to seeking it.

§303. Staying on Best Behavior

Let's talk about the political equation for a moment. The fact is no one is going to agree politically with every elected official they encounter. Your advocates' personal politics don't matter here. They are on the Hill to represent your position and to lobby for your initiatives. Some may need to swallow hard at times. Nonetheless, they must stick their own beliefs in their back pocket. If they prove unable or unwilling to do so, boot them from the lineup.

No matter who you meet with and what your group members' personal opinions of them may be, make sure to demonstrate proper respect and deference at every turn. This bears emphasis, especially in today's fractured political environment. Remember, these office holders were duly elected by the people back home. And on a practical level, you may notice that most members do not suffer from low self-esteem.

At the same time, refuse to be intimidated. There are those in public office — and their staff members — who blatantly try to cow others. Don't let them get under your skin. Your grassroots representatives are there to educate Congress concerning a valid point of public policy. Keep the discussions on a professional, even keel.

§304. The Importance of Congressional Staff

It is vital to have a discussion with your advocates about how Congressional staff fits into the picture, for it is difficult to overstate staff's importance. They speak for their members and carry plenty of clout with the boss, so treat them with respect. This comes into play when considering another Capitol Hill truth: The meeting may take place with staff rather than the member. And that's okay.

In many cases, staff (and not the representative or senator) are the people with whom you will have the closest relationships. Take care in cultivating and tending those important bonds.

Your meetings may be with a legislative aide who deals with your issue (LA in Hill parlance) or the legislative director (LD). You may, on rarer occasion, gain an audience with the chief of staff. Be sure to give your advocates a sense of this Hill hierarchy.

It may also be useful to point out to your group that there are two types of staffers on the Hill: Committee staff and personal staff. Committee staff work for Congressional committees and subcommittees. They tend to be more experienced since they devote their careers to a narrow range of issues. By comparison, personal staff — those who work directly in a member's office — tend to have broader portfolios and are more focused on the home fires back in the state or Congressional district.

Prepare your emissaries for the fact that some staffers may be quite young. They may, in fact, remind some of your advocates of their children or grandchildren. Despite their youth, it is critical to realize that these players have the boss' ear. While nepotism and campaign favors can come into play in some cases, landing a job on the Hill is highly competitive, so these staffers tend to be among the best and brightest.

§305. Flexibility Is Key

Expect highly fluid timetables and meeting participants, for Capitol Hill is legendary for its last minute adjustments (some might call this organizational attention deficit disorder; regardless, you have to deal with the shifting sands).

You may have scheduled a 15-minute meeting with a lawmaker. Tell your emissaries not to be surprised if that morphs into a meeting with staff only, and that they should under no circumstance take this as an insult. This is important so I'll say it again: Do not be insulted. They can still deliver your message and advocate for what you want. This becomes an important connection for future efforts since you are more likely to develop closer relationships with staff than with the member.

§306. Directing the Dialogue

Once in the door, it is up to your people to control the flow as best they can. While briefly establishing rapport is fine, it is best to avoid long digressions about common hometowns, the local ballclub, or shared alma maters. Get down to business quickly.

You and your colleagues have spent much time and forethought on [developing your messages](#). Don't waste that effort. Job number one is to commit to delivering them during your meetings. Since schedules can change in the blink of an eye, you must be prepared to alter on the fly how much of your message you can deliver.

To emphasize this point, encourage your group to organize remarks as they would for a speech. Develop and deliver quotable quotes that will stick in the member's mind. Use the techniques learned during the rehearsal that took place in your preparatory workshop directed by you and your consultant.

Also inform your advocates that a Congressional office is an often frenzied place, so they should be prepared to ignore any distractions. There are likely to be plenty — staffers interrupting to have a word with the boss, incessant phone calls, and people scurrying in and out of the room seemingly at random, to cite just a few. Do your best to keep a conversational flow going in your chosen direction no matter how hectic things may become.

§307. Exit with Grace — and Power

Impress upon your grassroots activists that they should never, ever leave a Hill advocacy meeting without “making the ask.” In other words, put the question directly to the lawmaker to determine whether you can count on their support. Then maintain silence until they reply. Many people find this uncomfortable. Too bad. This is life in the big leagues. Make the ask. Wait for an answer.

Will lawmakers sometimes try to weasel out of committing to a position? Sure. They make their living in politics. Nonetheless, press for a response as diplomatically as possible, multiple times, if need be.

As the resident government relations expert, you no doubt provided a one-page leave behind that succinctly reinforces your message. Or, better yet, you delivered it to Congressional staff in advance of your meeting. Remind your advocates to hand your literature to the member as the meeting ends. The timing of this is important. Never hand it over at the beginning of the meeting. You want all the attention focused on your discussion, not a sheet of paper. That exists for after the fact reinforcement.

As the meeting breaks up, instruct your emissaries to ask the member and their staff who else you should talk to on the Hill. They may hold the keys to some hidden doors. Introductions to other representatives and senators are most helpful, but there’s more. Don’t ignore introductions to Hill staffers in other members’ offices or on key committees. This type of opening may be just what you need to break the ice with a pivotal committee staffer. Also, they may have connections with government relations experts in other organizations who are working on your issue, perhaps unbeknownst to you.

Also alert your envoys that they are never to offer a campaign contribution when making the rounds on Capitol Hill. If they choose to contribute to a certain candidate, that is their right. They must realize, however, that there is a time and place for everything. Slipping an envelope to a member of Congress or a staffer puts them in an awkward position and makes the would-be donor look like a know-nothing.

§308. Q&A

A typical Hill visit is a give and take session. Rare is the unfettered opportunity to stand on a soapbox and speechify. Expect to be interrupted. This means your advocates need to anticipate questions legislators may ask. These questions generally fall into three categories:

- Routine questions you are likely to hear in nearly every meeting.
- Questions you want to hear (that you may have fed your representative's staff in advance).
- Hostile questions you never want to hear.

As part of your practice regimen, decide [how to respond to various questions](#). Also of prime importance, decide who among your delegation will reply. If you are unsure, appoint a “master of ceremonies” who can direct queries to the appropriate individual.

As in any business meeting, never guess at a response. If there is doubt about how to answer, it is fine to offer to provide the information once you check your records or talk with your resident expert in that subject area, with a promise to get back to the member of Congress in timely fashion.

Section 4. Follow Up Is Crucial

Your Hill visits will no doubt do some good in advancing your cause. If, however, you fail to assess your activists' performance, they might as well have stayed home in their easy chairs. You need a plan for assessing critical information garnered during your meetings.

One important point here: Ensure the [consultant](#) you bring on board places a priority on this post-visit evaluation. It is imperative that you assess performance of your advocates, your message, your targeting, and your government relations staff whether you conduct a fly-in or Zoom-in.

§401. Don't Waste Your Good Work

While your advocates are still on the Hill, each individual should take a moment to jot down contemporaneous notes immediately after each visit. This is vitally important, for most of us are not memory champs. Dedicating even 30 seconds to writing some rough notes will help to give everybody's memory the jog it needs later.

Upon completion of a meeting, instruct your grassroots squad to exit the member's office, round a corner so that they are out of eyesight and earshot (though still be cautious of your

surroundings; you never know who that person walking down the hall works for), then stop and memorialize the conversation. Take particular heed of the member's stance on your issue and what they said when you made your ask. Did they offer unwavering support? Shut down the conversation? Hem and haw?

What nonverbal signals did they send? Were they attentive and nodding as you made your pitch? Or shuffling paperwork and avoiding eye contact? Note these indicators, too, in your written report.

If you have time between appointments, as is often the case, find an out-of-the-way location and share thoughts with one another. Charge someone with taking notes of these conversations, too.

If your visit is held via video conference, do not debrief on that same call. Arrange in advance a separate connection you share only with your advocates, not the Congressional office. This prevents any eavesdropping, unintentional or otherwise.

§402. Post-Meeting Feedback

I strongly suggest making it mandatory for all advocates to attend a post-visit debriefing session immediately after all visits are complete. It doesn't need to be an hours-long marathon, but you do need to spend at least 15 to 30 minutes with *everyone* in the same room or on the same video connection. If you need a hammer to enforce 100 percent presence at this crucial meeting, make the receipt of any stipend contingent upon signing a post-visit meeting attendance form.

Make sure to build this time into the published agenda distributed before your advocacy day. That way no one is surprised when asked to stay. It is also a good idea to discourage people from booking flights back home that depart too early to allow for this critical information gathering phase. You need to make this happen, for the longer you wait to assess feedback, the more stale and unreliable your information.

Work is not finished even after your day on the Hill has ended and everyone is back home. Encourage your advocates to flesh out their rough notes into a concise memo for you and your government relations colleagues. You might offer a convenient form they can submit. Emphasize to everyone how priceless their contributions are to the organization's institutional memory and future success.

§403. What Worked? What Didn't?

Next, assess the effectiveness of both your efforts and those of your advocates. Solicit feedback from those who participated as well as from all members of your government relations staff.

It is mandatory to take a cold, hard look at the level of accomplishment of your efforts. What worked well that you can duplicate next time? What needs to be changed or eliminated? Examine everything from your message to your logistical preparation to the members of Congress you targeted.

Also evaluate your grassroots advocates. Who are the leaders that can be relied upon in future endeavors? Who needs more polish and experience? Who is hopeless (much as you might like to find a role for everyone, it's just not a realistic goal; a certain percentage, no matter how well-intentioned, will flunk out)? How were the dynamics among advocates? Which groups clicked? Which should be reshuffled?

§404. Next Steps

Before the bloom is off the rose and everyone returns to their workaday world, coordinate your follow up actions and next steps. This could involve such matters as assigning one of your advocates to maintain contact with a certain Congressional staffer, determining when you might need to schedule another round of Hill visits, or deciding to revisit your [legislative strategy](#).

Remind your advocates to get back in touch with their local press. Encourage them to share photos of the event. If you met by Zoom-in, provide your activists with a screen shot of the event they can distribute to the media and on their digital media channels.

Encourage them to send handwritten thank you notes or emails. This classy touch separates your business from the pack. There are few attention grabbers as effective as the handwritten note.

A great tip I gleaned from an experienced government relations pro: Hand write and mail your note via surface mail. Before you do, scan it and also email it to your Congressional contact. Voila. A timely email with personal polish.

Also on the email front, do you remember that one-page leave behind containing your message that you presented the lawmaker upon your exit? Email a PDF copy to your staff contact so they have an electronic version on file, too.

Regardless how you do it, it is important to maintain contact with those you visited. This should not be a one-time outreach effort, but a program over time that keeps your organization and your issues in their field of vision. When Congressional staff realize that you plan to see things through, they are likely to devote more attention to your issue and raise your perspectives with the boss more meaningfully.

One way to maintain this ongoing contact is to leverage efforts back in their home districts. Suggest that your advocates invite elected representatives to site tours, ribbon cuttings, luncheons, and the like. Also advise that they attend the member's district meetings, even if it's just to reintroduce themselves and update the member on any particulars surrounding your issues.

Section 5. Closing Statement

What you do before, during, and after your Hill visits matters. The more energy you devote to coordination and preparation — both on behalf of your organization and your advocates — the higher your odds for the realization of your legislative agenda.

While inside-the-Beltway success doesn't come easy, conscientious participation in a [fly-in](#) or Zoom-in can make a difference. Savvy government relations experts know that this method works.

This guide provides practical steps to streamline and improve your next Washington lobby day. Do you have what it takes to utilize grassroots advocacy on Capitol Hill to create success for your organization?

You have the power to advance your public policy goals when you and your grassroots advocates deliver your message to lawmakers with skill and confidence. Cultivate these talents and you will be on your way to achieving your public policy goals.

I invite you to [get in touch with me](#) when you are ready to implement the strategies outlined here. Also, feel free to offer other techniques you've discovered. Your ideas may well appear in a future edition.

About Ed Barks

Ed Barks is a communications strategy consultant and author. His corporate and association clients hire him to provide them with the messages and everyday communications skills their executives need.

He shows them how to gain an enhanced reputation, more confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals.

Ed is the author of [four books for communications and government relations experts](#), and for executives who represent the public face of their companies:

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Clients who turn to him for strategic advice say he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his counsel “two thumbs up!”

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 5700 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations executives toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

He is also the founder and community leader of the [C-suite Blueprint blog](#).

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