



How to Email Congress and Make It Count



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By Chris Nehls

Reports that email is dead as an advocacy tool have been greatly exaggerated—and nowhere is this notion more true than on Capitol Hill.

Even with the growing sophistication of social media platforms, stodgy old email remains the most important form of communication for constituents and office holders. Though mass emailings have made the tool a blessing and a curse for congressional offices, email still remains the most cost-effective way to communicate. And with the election adding a major cast of new faces—both lawmakers and their staff—those who want to influence Congress in coming weeks will need to know how to use it to best effect.

The sheer volume of electronic communications that most offices receive mean that congressional staff place a priority on efficiently sorting and prioritizing incoming messages. How much email does Congress get? The Senate received almost 143 million communiqués through Oct. 21 of this year, and the House received roughly the same amount through September, according to officials in both chambers. In the Senate, that's more than eight emails for every one incoming phone call.

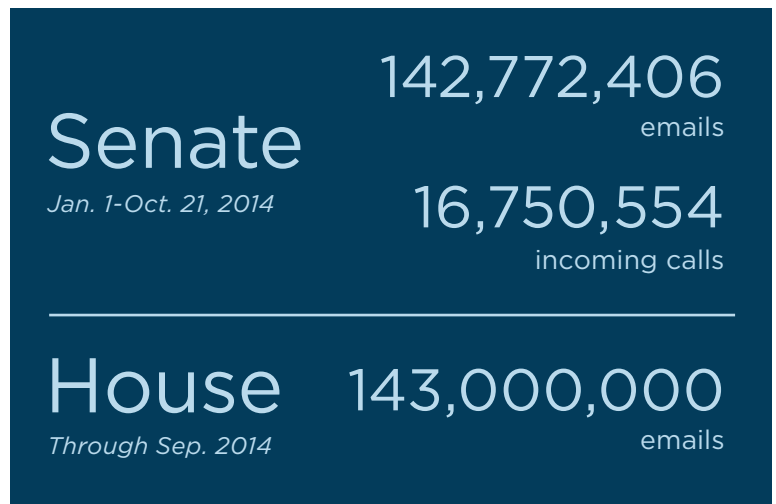
But despite the volume, it is still possible to initiate two-way email dialog with Congressional offices, by understanding how they process

communications and using a few techniques to insure you are taken seriously. While staffers rarely speak publicly about how email is parsed and addressed inside the Congress, CQ Roll Call spoke privately to sources, including those still working on Capitol Hill and former staffers, in order to compile some strategies that can help insure that your email—and your message—has a fighting chance.

Social and Email Are Different

There is gathering evidence that social media is being taken more seriously as a communications tool in congressional offices. While email is still the dominant form of communication, one **recent survey** of congressional staff by the Congressional Management Foundation showed that 63 percent said they expected communications with constituents over social media to increase over that via email or phone calls in the next five to 10 years.

But for now, email is still king—and that means it is important to know that in most Congressional offices, social media and email still operate in separate communications silos. Social media accounts are generally the domain of press teams, and not legislative staff. Social media is still more often used as a general barometer than a two-way communications tool. And so Twitter blasts about issues are perhaps less likely to grab the attention of staffers who are helping



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lawmakers on policy decisions. A good communications team, though, will route thoughtfully-written emails that express concerns about policy choices to the appropriate legislative aide.

There's nothing wrong with using multiple channels. But if you are trying to influence a lawmaker, email is a must-have communication stream—the one to use if you only use one.

Make It Personal

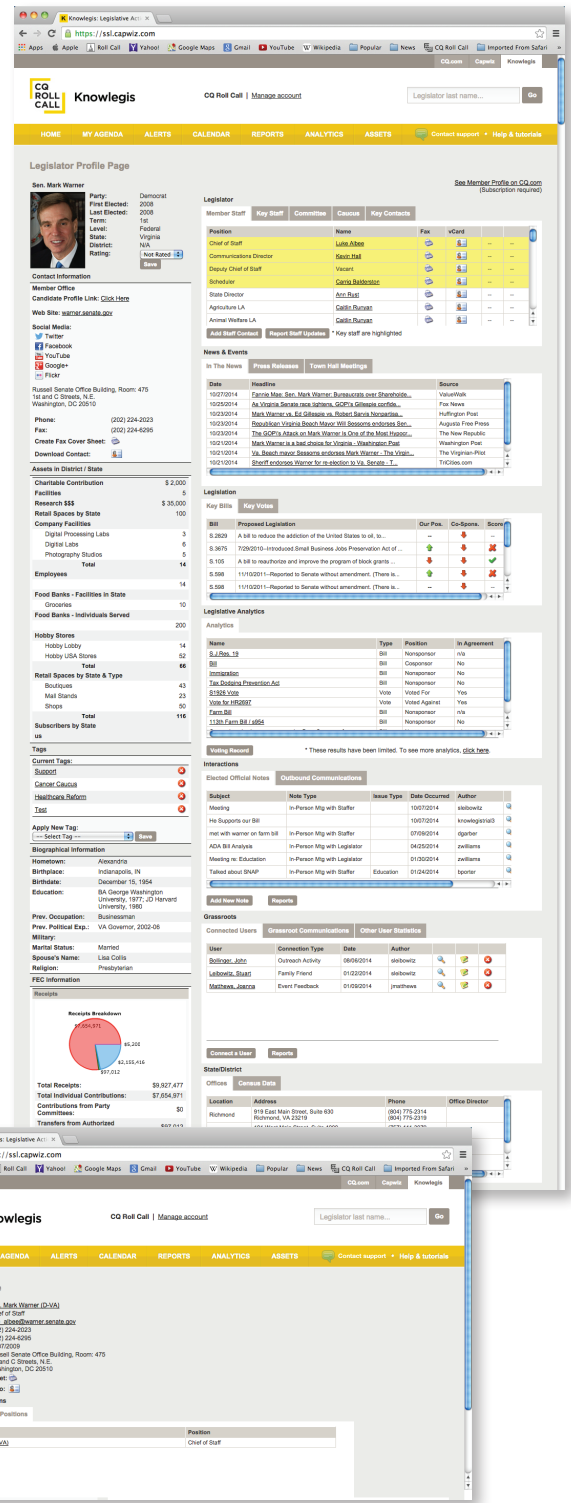
Correspondence, even if it's done by many people all at once, is still a human endeavor. And personalization counts, especially to a staffer who is wading through hundreds of emails on the same or similar topics. The ones that stand out will be the ones that are different, where the sender took the time to give it some character.

This personalization can be as little as mentioning a sender's profession or professional experience. Members of Congress value the perspective of their constituents on how policy will affect them personally, particularly if it's in the pocketbook. Staffers want to keep tabs on whom from the district is commenting on specific issues, be they local merchants, bankers or teachers. Email that explain clearly how an issue impacts real people may be compelling enough for a staffer not just to write back, but pick up the phone and call.

Thanks to technology, this kind of personalization can be done even if your organization is engaged in a large-scale letter-writing campaign. Though it was not directed at Congress, The Electronic Frontier Foundation's campaign targeting the Federal Communications Commission on "net neutrality" is instructive.

The group generated more than 116,000 letters to the FCC concerning the agency's proposed rule to allow Internet service providers to charge different rates for higher-speed traffic content. The letters were generated through the [EFF's DearFCC.org](#) website. What made the campaign unique was the ability for users to customize the messages they send.

"We didn't do the typical thing of making it as easy as possible to sign onto these comments where you just give an email address and



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you're done," EFF activism director Rainey Reitman said. "We wanted to have the comments we generated help people articulate what it was about net neutrality that was so important to them and why they were concerned about the issue."

The EFF site provides several messaging choices in two drop-down menus that argued how the end of net neutrality would affect consumer choice and future entrepreneurship. Before firing off their message, signees could also write their own personal testimony in a dedicated text box.

"What we were really trying to get at was personal stories of internet users affected by this [proposed rule] and how their businesses might be affected, how their research opportunities might be affected so that the FCC can see that this is actually a very human issue affecting everyday internet users," Reitman said. By encouraging substantive, personal comments, Reitman said, the EFF hoped to make the FCC pay attention "in a way they might not with a one-sentence form letter."

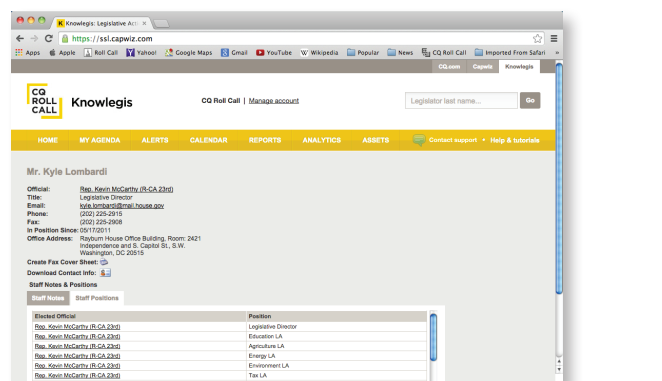
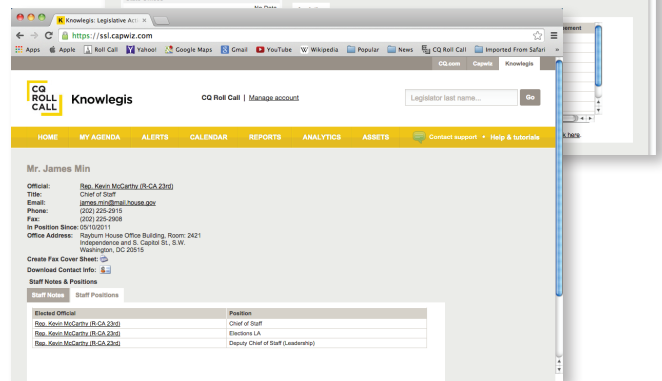
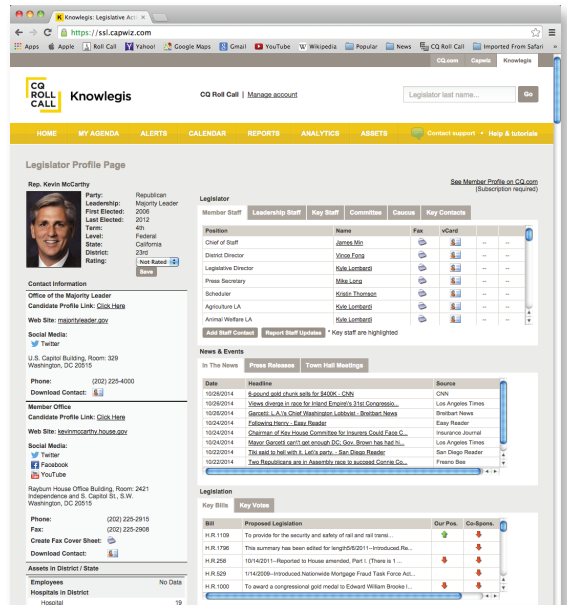
Even if your group is using form letters, make sure the organization sending the email is identified clearly. Staffers may have friends or contacts in the organization they can reach out to on the issue. Advocates that have personal relationships with staffers should obviously make that clear as well.

For a mass email campaign, researching the name of the staffers who handle specific policy areas for lawmakers is helpful. It's much more likely a staffer will open an email with their name in the subject line, for instance, than it is if the email has a generic subject line that looks like it went to a mass of people on the Hill.

Know the Audience

Remember, the first set of eyes reading any email is a staffer who's likely a little overwhelmed. Enough compelling, well-written emails on a topic may cause them to run the issue up the office chain of command.

Advocates sending "thank you" or "spank you" emails—those praising or chiding lawmakers for votes on specific legislation—should be certain how the lawmaker voted. And while a thank you is a nice gesture, emailing support before a tough vote is likely to have more impact on a lawmaker than communiqués sent afterward.



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Also, direct correspondence to an individual lawmaker. By rule, committees cannot perform constituent services. Blasting the entire committee will only catch messages in spam filters set up to discard emails from people outside of a lawmaker's district.

There's also a strong argument to direct the bulk of your efforts at the member of Congress who represents you.

"During my time managing a congressional mail program, it was regular practice to screen mail and phone calls based on the person's residence," said former Capitol Hill staffer and political strategist Travis N. Taylor. "If they didn't live in my boss' district, their correspondence didn't make it past me, and responding to our constituents kept me plenty busy. Only the concerns and opinions of our constituents were passed up the hierarchy and stood a chance of reaching the boss' desk.

"A second reason for contacting only an individual's personal representatives stems from a representative-democratic theory. Members of Congress are elected from explicit geographic confines and represent a specific constituency. They are duty-bound to the people back home who cast their ballots for (and against) them. Constituents expect—and deserve—superior constituent service; they expect to be heard by their representative. Thus, members don't have an interest in representing the opinions of people from outside their district or state.

Taylor said that those seeking to influence a member of Congress on a particular issue should develop a "ground game," not unlike a political campaign. That means not just email letters, but perhaps calls and visits, too.

"The ones that received the most attention from the senior staff and our boss were the ones who brought along someone from our district or at least from our state," Taylor said. "These organizations understood that their message rang louder coming from the mouth of a constituent.

"For constituents, it is important to build a rapport with their member's office. Constituents should find out which staff member in the office handles the policy for their issue. Then the constituent can share their opinions and thoughts with that staff member. If citizens build a relationship with the congressional staffer, he or she will be more likely to remember the constituent when their particular issue comes up."

If your representative is not a member of a committee dealing with a specific piece of legislation, it still is worth sending an email about it. Remember, lawmakers lobby each other, and everyone has a piece of the appropriations process, even if they're not on the Appropriations Committee.

"When citizens help drive an issue with their individual representatives," Taylor said, "chances are members will share their position with their colleagues."

Aisha Chowdhry contributed to this report.

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Tips From a Former Staffer

By Lauren Culbertston

Ask any Capitol Hill staffer about their email inbox and they will tell you about how it's inundated with emails on every topic under the sun.

Because of the public nature of their workplaces, staffers' primary work email addresses are often published in directories or listed in online databases, resulting in mass emails, one-off requests and spam. Given these factors, breaking through the clutter of a Hill staffer's email inbox can be challenging.

But it is important because email remains the preferred and primary means of communication on Capitol Hill. Here are some quick and practical tips to make sure that your message is read:

The Subject Line

DO

keep the subject line germane to the email content so that the recipient gets the point at first glance and can easily search for the email later. Putting the staffer's first name in the subject line is one strategy to ensure that your email stands out. For example: "Hi, John - Question about XYZ Topic."

DON'T

use a subject line that could be mistaken for a mass email. Since staffers receive many mass emails, they often delete them in bulk without ever reading them.

The Content

DO

keep your message brief and straight to the point. If your email includes an ask, make sure that the ask is crystal clear. When providing information, be truthful, accurate and straightforward. Hill staffers can sniff out when someone is misleading them or conveniently leaving out details. Credibility is everything in this world.

DO

offer to provide additional information or materials, when appropriate.

DON'T

misspell the staffer or their boss' name. Address senators as "senator," not congressman. House members should be addressed as "congressman." Also, if you are "plugging in" someone's name or their boss' name into a form or prewritten email that you are sending to multiple people, make sure that the font and font color are uniform. Your email will be perceived as impersonal if the entire email text is black and in one font and "Dear Jane" is blue and in another one.

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Tone and Timing

DO

open with a pleasantry to set a positive tone. It never hurts to be polite. Also, if you've met the recipient before but don't know them well, DO remind the staffer of how you know each other or where you met.

DO

mention in your message, if you call a staffer and leave a voicemail, that you will follow up with an email with your request in writing, along with your contact information.

DON'T

email a staffer when their boss' legislation is on the floor or after hours, unless it can't wait or your email is pertinent to legislative action that is underway.

As an overall best practice, especially when you are trying to influence Capitol Hill to take action, create an environment where it is convenient and easy for the action to take place, and never underestimate the value of common sense and practicality.

Lauren Culbertston is director at Story Partners in Washington, DC. Prior to joining the firm, Lauren worked in the U.S. Senate as the deputy communications director and press secretary for Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.)

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- Send customized email communications leveraging your custom lists and track open rates.
- Receive timely alerts on congressional staff changes, press releases, town hall meetings and news.
- Collect and review voting trends on issues important to you, using reporting tools that deliver interactive legislative analysis.

The screenshot displays the Knowlegis web application interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the CQ Roll Call logo and the word "Knowlegis". Below this is a search bar for "Legislator last name...". The main content area is titled "Legislator Profile Page" and features a profile for "Sen. Mark Warner". The profile includes a photo, a "Party" dropdown set to "Democrat", and various biographical details such as "First Elected: 2008", "Last Elected: 2008", "Term: 1st", "Level: Federal", "State: Virginia", "District: N/A", and "Rating: Not Rated". There is a "Save" button next to the rating. Below the profile information is a "Contact Information" section with a "Member Office" section containing the website "warner.senate.gov" and "Social Media" links for Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr. The address is "Russell Senate Office Building, Room: 475, 1st and C Streets, N.E., Washington, DC 20510". Contact details include "Phone: (202) 224-2023" and "Fax: (202) 224-6295".

On the right side of the profile page, there is a "Legislator" section with tabs for "Member Staff", "Key Staff", "Committee", "Caucus", and "Key Contacts". The "Member Staff" tab is active, showing a table of staff members:

| Position | Name | Fax | vCard | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----|-------|----|----|
| Chief Counsel | David Hallock | | | -- | -- |
| Chief of Staff | Luke Albee | | | -- | -- |
| Communications Director | Kevin Hall | | | -- | -- |
| Deputy Chief of Staff | David Hallock | | | -- | -- |
| Legislative Director | David Hallock | | | -- | -- |
| Scheduler | Carria Balderston | | | -- | -- |
| State Director | David Hallock | | | -- | -- |

Below the staff table is a "News & Events" section with tabs for "In The News", "Press Releases", and "Town Hall Meetings". The "In The News" tab is active, showing a table of news items:

| Date | Headline | Source |
|------------|--|---------------------------|
| 01/29/2013 | Rubin: How the GOP can take the Senate - Salt Lake Tribune | Salt Lake Tribune |
| 01/29/2013 | Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine to Discuss Budget and Deb... | Sacramento Bee |
| 01/29/2013 | Barquet gives peek into new dentistry school - Bluefield ... | Bluefield Daily Telegraph |

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77 K Street NE
Washington, DC 20002-4681
T 202 650 6500
E customerservice@cqrollcall.com