

Strong Stalks Networks

Members of Congress respond to constituents. To amplify advocacy messages and congressional requests it is important to enlist, guide, and motivate these constituents. Ideally, universities should have a “Strong Stalks” network which can be mobilized as needed. This Best Practices Guide explains how to build and maintain such a network, how/when to mobilize it, and how to ensure its effectiveness.

For many decades, congressional advocacy efforts have attempted to organize and motivate constituent¹ networks using grassroots and grasstops campaigns. Grassroots campaigns focus on rank-and-file constituents who, it is hoped, can be encouraged to join other like-minded individuals to send thousands of identical (form) postcards, letters, faxes, or emails to their legislators. Grasstops campaigns, which emphasize “quality” over “quantity,” aim to get a select number of powerful community leaders and other “influentials” to write or call their “friends” in Congress.

Recent opinion research shows that form messages sent to Congress have limited impact.² (Details below.) That same research indicates that personalized messages, on the other hand, can be extremely persuasive in convincing a Member of Congress to support or oppose a particular position. Based on this research, a new system for organizing constituent networks—one which combines the best elements of grasstops and grassroots campaigns—is proposed. Let’s call it the “Strong Stalks” system.

BUILDING AND MOBILIZING STRONG STALKS NETWORKS

Universities have thousands of individuals connected to them. Direct connections include employees, retirees, students, and alumni. Indirect connections, (stakeholders) include local officials, customers, neighbors, and others who derive economic or other benefits from the university or

1. “Constituent,” in this context, means an individual living within the area represented by a particular senator (state) or representative (district).

2. *Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2011.



ABOUT US

Cornerstone Government Affairs is a full-service, bipartisan public affairs firm founded in 2002. We represent a diverse group of clients, from myriad industries and sectors, and maintain expertise in a wide range of issue areas including agriculture, defense, education, energy, health, homeland security, international affairs, tax policy, telecommunications, and transportation and infrastructure.

ABOUT THESE BEST PRACTICES GUIDES

To help our land-grant clients become more effective citizen advocates, we have prepared a series of Best Practices in Government Relations Guides. These can be found at: www.land-grant.org/guides.html

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related institutions. Nearly everyone connected to the university is, therefore, potentially a Strong Stalk. The only test is whether they are willing—when asked—to pick up their cell phone or put e-pen to e-paper and make a highly personalized plea on your behalf. Here’s how to build and mobilize a Strong Stalks Network:

- **Strongest of the Strong.** The goal of a Strong Stalks Network is to enable communications campaigns that combine messages from many people (those at the grassroots) and appeals from individuals with established congressional relationships (those at the grassstops). So, at the outset, you must identify the “strongest of the strong,” and give them greater personal attention throughout the process outlined below.
- **Initial Solicitation.** Like every first impression, the initial contact is key to success in building your network. Compose a carefully-worded message to each individual who might become a Strong Stalk. Tell them: (1) what you’re trying to accomplish; (2) what you expect of them; (3) how often you expect to make contact; and (4) what’s in it for them. (Attachment 1 provides a sample message.) Make it clear that you only want individuals who are willing to call or write their legislators and deliver persuasive, polite, and highly-personalized requests. Also make it clear that you expect to receive proof that they actually followed through. (See Attachment 1.)
- **Call to Action Requests.** Once commitments and contact information have been received from each Strong Stalk, you’re ready to call upon them as needed. Call to Action requests, like solicitation messages, must be succinct and carefully worded. You must provide specific information, such as: (1) how to look-up their representative; (2) the contact method you want them to employ (phone, email, etc.); (3) the deadline for making contact; (4) talking points which must be translated into personalized messages; and (5) how you expect them to demonstrate proof of delivery. (See Attachment 2 for a sample.)
- **Acknowledgement and Follow-up.** People love to know they’re appreciated. Thus, it is extremely critical to acknowledge and thank your Strong Stalks after they’ve delivered the mail. (That’s a key reason why proof of delivery is recommended.) You should also stay in touch to let them know the outcome of their actions.

- **Progress Reports.** It’s also wise to prepare annual or semi-annual reports to your Strong Stalks letting them know what has been accomplished through their collective efforts. These reports need not be lengthy, but should contain some effectiveness metrics along the lines of: “In June we issued a Call to Action on the Agriculture Appropriations bill and we are pleased to report that 400 of you responded!”

RESEARCH BEHIND THE STRONG STALKS CONCEPT

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF)³ has conducted extensive research on how citizens and Members of Congress communicate with each other. In 2011, the CMF released the results of an online survey of congressional staff concerning “attitudes and practices related to managing constituent communications.” Responses from more than 250 House and Senate staff are outlined in the CMF report entitled: *Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill*.

Cornerstone Government Affairs routinely monitors and participates in congressional communications efforts and based on this experience would underscore several key findings in the CMF report:

- Contacts from constituents really do influence congressional decisions, and the most potent legislative campaigns rely heavily upon such contacts.
- In descending order of impact, the most powerful methods of contact are: in-person visits from constituents; contact from a constituent who represents others; individualized postal letters or email messages; telephone calls; comments at town hall meetings; and letters to the editor.
- The least effective methods of contact, include all form communications (identical cards/letters, email, and faxes) and comments on social media sites.

And, when it comes to the design and execution of successful Strong Stalks campaigns, one statement in the CMF report really sums it all up:

3. CMF is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan nonprofit “dedicated to helping Congress and its Members meet the evolving needs and expectations of an engaged and informed 21st century citizenry.”

“What matters most is the content, not the vehicle. Whether they are delivered via email or postal mail, messages that are customized in some way... are much more influential than identical form messages. The personal touch from a constituent goes a long way toward differentiating a message.”

THE DEVILISH DETAILS

To make a Strong Stalks system work, it's important to understand the logic behind certain elements:

- **Form Messages Are Passé.** Dating back at least to the 1960s (long before the advent of email or even fax machines), organizations trying to influence congressional decisions have sent postcards to their network with instructions that the cards should be signed and mailed to their representative and two senators. And for just as long, House and Senate offices have done little more than count the number of incoming form messages and prepare a standard reply. Even though form messages have never carried much weight, they have grown exponentially over the last 50 years as technological advances have made them cheaper and easier to produce/deliver. Not only have form faxes, cards, letters, and email created an ever-increasing burden on congressional offices (which have had the same number of staff since 1979), but 53% of the staff members responding to the CMF survey believe that most form emails are sent without the sender's knowledge!
- **Personalization Is Easy.** The CMF survey asked congressional staff to evaluate several ways that a constituent can personalize a message. Of those surveyed, 77% said that including “information about the impact that the bill would have on the district or state” (jobs, economic impact, etc.) would be either “helpful” or “very helpful” and 74% stated that “the constituent's reasons for supporting or opposing the bill or issue” would be helpful or very helpful. (A “personal story” related to the bill or issue was judged to be either helpful or very helpful by 48% of respondents.)
- **Grasstops Campaigns Work.** Grassroots efforts that generate only identical form messages (even in large quantities) are essentially worthless. Grasstops campaigns, on the other hand, can produce results if executed properly. (There is an entire cottage industry in Washington that manages such efforts.) So, it is critical that you

identify and enlist a few key individuals (the “strongest of the strong”) within each congressional district and that you work personally with them when a Call to Action effort is active.

- **Proof of Delivery Is Essential.** Humans are human. We're all pulled in many different directions every day. A successful Strong Stalks network will succeed only if actual, personalized contacts are made with the targeted congressional offices. For that reason, you must be clear to those you enlist that you will only call upon them when absolutely necessary, but when you do call you expect them to respond as requested and provide proof of delivery. All that's needed is a simple honor system whereby they tell you: “I contacted Senators A and B and Representative C today. I went to their web sites and filled in their constituent contact forms with a personalized message based upon the talking points you provided.”
- **Show Them Some Love.** The knowledge that your Strong Stalks have participated in our participatory democracy ought to be reward enough. But, there is nothing wrong with showing your Strong Stalks just how much you appreciate their effort. This should, at a minimum, take the form of prompt and personalized thank you messages, but you may also want to consider tangible rewards, such as frameable certificates, lapel pins, small denomination gift cards, or other lagniappes. There is nothing illegal or unethical about such rewards, so show them some love!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

According to the CMF survey, “citizens have more power than they realize... The most influential advocacy strategies for swaying an undecided Member of Congress depend on personal communications from constituents. Whether individuals make contact face-to-face, by phone, or through personalized email or postal mail, senators and representatives are influenced by their constituents' own views about the public policy issues before them.” [Emphasis added.]

Successful advocacy efforts combine direct lobbying by both citizens and professionals with personalized constituent contacts by telephone, email, or regular mail. If your grassroots or grasstops networks aren't working to your satisfaction, perhaps it's time to take your advocacy program to the next level by building, mobilizing, and rewarding a Strong Stalks network.

ATTACHMENT 1
SAMPLE SOLICITATION MESSAGE

Dear _____:

I am writing to you because you are in a position to be of great service to ___ [Name of University] ___ and I am hopeful that I can encourage you to join our new citizen's advocacy campaign.

[Name of University] ___ is a land-grant university. We receive funding from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) through formula allocations and competitive grants. The funds that come to us from NIFA: support a rich and diverse array of research, extension, and higher education programs; are often matched at least dollar-for-dollar from the state; and leverage other public and private investments.

The federal-state land-grant partnership has served America well for 150 years. Now, however, funding for the partnership is under sustained attack and those of us who care passionately about the land-grant mission must make our voices heard here in ___ [Name of State] ___ and in Washington, DC.

Will you agree to be of assistance? Can I call upon you two or three times a year?

If you will commit to help, here's exactly what would be required:

- When Congressional action is imminent on a critical land-grant funding issue, I will contact you by email to briefly explain the issue.
- I will provide you with a list of "talking points" that you will use to craft your own short, personalized message, to be sent to your two U.S. Senators and/or Representative.
- You will log on to the relevant congressional websites, fill in your contact information, and deliver your personalized message in a persuasive, polite, and timely manner. (*Alternate Instruction for the Strongest of the Strong: You will call or email Representative X or her chief of staff, and deliver your personalized message in a persuasive, polite, and timely manner.*)
- Because individual form messages have very little impact on congressional decisions, it is imperative that you make a personalized plea. Therefore, if you decide to join this effort, you must agree that you will not "cut and paste" my talking points. Instead, you must use your own words.
- The only other thing I ask is for some "proof of delivery." All you need do is send an email or call me to say: "I contacted Senators A and B and Representative C today and delivered a personalized message based upon the talking points you provided."

I pledge to only call upon you when absolutely necessary, to provide everything you'll need, and to keep you informed about the results of our mutual effort. Will you join this new campaign? Can we count on you?

Thanks for considering this request.

Sincerely,

ATTACHMENT 2A
SAMPLE “CALL TO ACTION” MESSAGE

Dear _____:

From prior communications you know that ___ [Name of University] ___ receives significant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). You have agreed to help protect that funding.

Rep. Harry Heartache plans to offer an amendment to the Agriculture Appropriations bill that would reduce NIFA funding by \$100 million. Therefore, we need you to contact your representative and ask him/her to oppose the Heartache amendment. Please follow these steps:

1. Determine (if necessary) your representative by clicking on this link: <http://house.gov/htbin/findrep> and entering your Zip code. When the results appear, click on the name of your representative to go directly to his/her website. (NOTE: You will need to know your Zip+4 Zip Code.)

2. Once you’re on your representative’s site, find his/her online contact form. (It’s most likely under “Contact Me” or “Email Me” on the site’s navigation menu.)

3. Enter your name, address, and other contact information as requested.

4. You may be asked to choose the general issue area under which your message falls. If so, choose “agriculture,” or “appropriations,” or something similar.

5. In the field labeled “message,” please insert a personalized message based upon the talking points listed below. It is absolutely critical that you do not simply cut and paste the talking points. Your message must be in your own words.

6. When you’ve submitted the email, please send me an email along these lines: “I went to Rep. X’s website today and filled in the constituent contact form with a personalized message based upon the talking points you provided.”

7. When you receive a response to your message, I’d appreciate it very much if you’d forward it to me.

Thanks for your assistance in this matter!

TALKING POINTS

- Rep. Harry Heartache plans to offer an amendment to cut \$100 million from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture when the Agriculture Appropriations bill is debated on the House floor.
- Cutting \$100 from the NIFA budget would result in a reduction of \$2 million at [Name of University] and would result in the loss of 20 direct jobs.
- Beyond the budget cuts and job losses, the Heartache amendment would greatly impair programs that benefit constituents such as me. Programs that would likely be cut include 4-H, and Integrated Pest Management. Please do not cut these programs.
- Please vote NO on the Heartache amendment. Thank you!

ATTACHMENT 2B
SAMPLE “CALL TO ACTION” MESSAGE (FOR THE STRONGEST OF THE STRONG)

Dear _____:

From prior communications you know that ___ [Name of University] ___ receives significant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). You have agreed to help protect that funding.

Rep. Harry Heartache plans to offer an amendment to the Agriculture Appropriations bill that would reduce NIFA funding by \$100 million. Therefore, we need you to call or email Representative X and personally ask her to oppose the Heartache amendment. Please follow these steps:

1. Use the talking points listed below, but personalize the message. It is absolutely critical that you do not simply cut and paste the talking points. Your message must be in your own words.
2. When you’ve made the call or sent the email, please call me personally to let me know that you’ve gotten through to Representative X, her chief of staff, district manager, or legislative assistant.
3. If you receive a written response, I’d appreciate it very much if you’d forward that to me.

Thanks for your assistance in this matter!

TALKING POINTS

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- Cutting \$100 from the NIFA budget would result in a reduction of \$2 million at [Name of University] and would result in the loss of 20 direct jobs.
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