



JOE GAGEN

# DO EMAILS WORK ?

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Interview with Tim Hysom, Congressional Management Foundation, January 2010

<http://www.congressfoundation.org/>

## **Does sending emails to Congress still work?**

Sending your views to Members of Congress does work, no matter what format they arrive in. Senators and Representatives want to know how their votes affect their constituents. One thing people always ask me is, "How many messages does a Member of Congress need to receive in order to change their mind?" There are as many answers to that question as there are Members of Congress: 541. **Sometimes a Member can be swayed by a single heartfelt and articulate message from a constituent.** Sometimes it's the sheer volume of communications that they receive that persuades them. **One important note, however, is that congressional offices do like postal communications because it is easy to see that the constituent took the time to write a handwritten letter,** but email is far easier for them to process and will ensure that your message arrives more quickly. The bottom line is that, yes, emails still work, but they are generally most effective if they are personal messages rather than form messages.

## **If my organization suggests sample text for an email to my members of Congress, how important is it for me to edit that sample text and add information about myself?**

It is very important for citizens to personalize the messages that they send to Members. Congressional staff members have revealed in our research that they place more weight on communications that convey how a piece of legislation will affect their constituents. While you might wholeheartedly agree with the suggested text that [your organization provides for you, take the time to tell the Member why the issue is so important to you, personally. It's not uncommon to then see Senators and Representatives go down to the Senate or House floor and say, "I received a letter from one of my constituents who told me how this legislation would devastate her small business." Those are the letters that persuade Members.

## **Can you tell me what happens to an email, a letter, or other constituent communication when it arrives in the office of a member of Congress?**

Well, I'm afraid some people might be dismayed to learn that Members of Congress are not sitting at their desks waiting to hear the words, "You've got mail!" It depends on the population of the Member's district or state, of course, but the average Member receives several thousand communications per week. Some get several thousand on an average day. The reality is that Members have staffers that help them read, categorize, and respond to messages. While there are some who insist on seeing every message that comes in, **most Members read a selection (another compelling reason to tell a personal story in your message) and otherwise rely on daily or weekly mail reports that summarize the messages that have come in.** Then, staffers also help craft responses to constituent messages

that reflect the Member's position for the Senator or Representative to review and approve. In a perfect world, Members would be able to read and respond to all of their own messages, but the reality is that if they did, they'd never be able to study the important policy issues of the day or go down to the floor to cast the votes we sent them to Washington for.

Many people report they receive form letters in response to their communications. Does this mean no one is really reading the letters we are sending and they have no impact? **No, it doesn't mean that at all. It usually just means that the office is trying to get as many responses out to constituents as quickly as possible. I was working with a Senate office the other day-and it was a Senator from a moderately populated state-that received 600,000 communications in 2009.** Can you image logging into your email account and seeing that many messages that need a response? In order to respond to them all and have time for all of the policy and constituent service work they do, they have to develop form messages. Form messages also help Members ensure their stated positions on issues are consistent. If 500 constituents have all asked a Member to oppose the passage of H.R. 1234, the Member wants all of those constituents to receive the same consistent message in reply. The only way they can determine what to send in response is to read the messages they receive. Depending on the message and the issue, there is always at least one staffer reading each message, and some get passed up through the ranks and land on the Senator or Representative's desk.

What's the most effective method for a constituent to share his or her opinion on an issue with a member of Congress?

**Our research with Members and congressional staff shows that if a Member has not already arrived at a firm position on an issue, the most effective way to persuade her or him is through a face to face meeting.** That's not surprising, though. And, you don't have to come to Washington to meet with your Member. You'd be surprised **how easy it might be to get a small group of people together and request a meeting with your Member when he or she is back in the state or district. Town hall meetings or other events closer to home can also be a way to get a little face-to-face time with your Member.** If that's impractical for whatever reason, Members and staff said that individual communications from constituents that tell a personalized story or make a compelling case of why the issue is important to the Member's district or state outweigh identical form communications, faxes, or even phone calls.

*Tim Hysom is the Director for Communications and Technology Services at the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF), a non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting a more effective Congress. He has spent eight years on the Hill and in an advisory role to congressional offices on both sides of the aisle. In this article he answers some common questions about communicating with Congress.*

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