

Make the Darn Ask!

Anyone who has ever read my [tipsheet](#), participated in an [Advocacy Roundtable](#) webinar, read my [book](#), seen one of my [workshops](#) or, you know, talked to me, knows that one of my main messages for advocates is “make the ask.” In my opinion it is almost always a waste of time to talk to an elected official without asking for something.

Believe it or not, though, people have actually had the audacity to disagree with me on this. I know, it shocked me as well :). I’ve listened to the critics and I’m here to say, well, they’re partially right (see, I listen to other people despite what my husband says). But I still stand by my “make the ask” advice. Let me explain what I mean.

First, though, before I get too much in to it, perhaps I should explain what I mean by “make the ask.” Simply put, advocates should ask for something specific as opposed to simply trying to “educate” or “inform” elected officials. Frankly, trying to educate elected officials without asking for something specific is like trying to educate a middle-schooler without telling them it will be on the test. It goes in one ear and out the other.

Those who disagree with this advice usually have something to say along the following lines: either they believe they’ll “get more attention if they don’t ask (since everyone else is);” they “just want to say thank you;” or they’ve “already asked and don’t want to be a pest.” These criticisms sound perfectly reasonable and in many cases are partially true. Let’s examine each in more detail.

“Everyone’s always asking. I’ll get more attention if I don’t”

Unfortunately, if you use all your time with an elected official to just say nice things, you won’t get their attention over the long term – and you’ll probably be ignored. I’m really sorry to have to put it that way, but it’s true. Yes, it’s nice for the legislator to have a meeting with someone who “isn’t always asking for something.” It’s even nicer for the legislator to have a meeting with someone who asks “how can I help you on your issues?” -- and I’m not in anyway suggesting that these questions should not be a part of your message.

That said, “making the ask” flips that switch in an elected official’s brain that says “hey, I better pay attention to what this person is saying.” It achieves that goal far more effectively than a polite “I don’t really need anything right now, I just thought I’d stop by.” The good news is that if you’re feeling non-aggressive, you can ask for something easy that, and here’s the key, ***provides the legislator with as much benefit as it does you!*** Here are some examples of what I mean:

- **A site visit:** Ask your elected officials to visit a facility in the district, perhaps a place where they can meet with constituents and be seen in a positive light in the media. You’re helping them connect with people in the community, and you’ve made an “ask.” In this case, the ask is “will you come and visit us in the district?” One of our lobby clients used this technique to approach members of Congress who would normally be, shall we say, a little skeptical of their views. By asking for something easy, like a site visit, instead of launching immediately in to a hard policy ask, these advocates have been able to build positive relationships with their legislators that will serve them well when the hard policy issues arise.

- **A statement of support:** Perhaps your elected official would be willing to make a public statement of support, either in writing or by making a speech. This can be especially useful when it's connected to a "hook" of some sort. So, for example, if it's National "hug a puppy" week, the elected official can make a statement about how wonderful it is to hug puppies – and you can be sure the media is there to get a picture of the puppy hugging activity (my puppy is available if needed). The ask, in this case, is "will you make a statement in support of 'hug a puppy' week?" And be sure to follow-up with all the talking points and other materials to make this happen. (hey, can we start a "hug a puppy" week?)
- **An article for your newsletter:** For advocates affiliated with a state or community organization that puts together a newsletter, asking your elected officials to write an article for that newsletter can be a great way of getting their attention. Most elected officials welcome the opportunity to put their name in front of their constituents, and your request that they post something in your publication will require them to think about your cause. In addition, if they agree to write the article (or, in most cases, to review the article you have drafted for them and agree to sign their name to it) they will almost always want to speak positively about your issue. That makes it much harder for them to vote against you should the time ever come.

In essence, these "relationship building asks" help you set the stage for future, sometimes more difficult or more controversial, policy asks. They are an ideal way to capture a legislator's attention without being too pushy.

I don't want to ask: I just want to say "thank you"

I heard a variation of this from a legislator who was also speaking at one of the conferences at which I was presenting. In fact, the legislator went on right before me and told the attendees that they should do nothing but thank the legislature for all the support for their issue and that there was no need to ask for anything specific. I was in a bit of an awkward position as I, well, completely disagreed.

Now, don't get me wrong. My mother raised me right. I do believe that we should all say "thank you" as frequently as possible. And if you're communicating with your elected officials frequently (say once per month or more) go ahead and use up one of those communications as a pure and simple thank you.

However, in this case the advice was directed at a group of people who talked to their representatives once-per-year. In these situations, while a thank you is a great way to start out, it should be accompanied with an "ask," even if it's one of the easy asks noted above. Without that ask (and the required follow-up on the ask), those lobby day participants would probably not have found any other occasions to talk to their legislators at any other point through the year.

I already asked and I didn't get an answer. They know what I want. I don't want to ask again.

This one really irritates me. The whole purpose of an ask is to eventually get an answer, right? Sure it's frustrating when our elected officials don't respond to our "asks" as quickly as we'd like. Why does that happen? Usually it's for one of three reasons. Either:

- the elected official simply forgot about the request -- with dozens of requests a day, this happens often.

- the elected official hasn't had time to form an opinion on your question
- the elected official is waiting to see how much you really want what you're asking for

All of these problems can be solved by asking again. I recognize that it might take months or even years to get a straight answer out of a member of Congress, state legislator or even city council member. But you sure won't get one at all if you don't ask again. Giving up after the first or second try just makes it way too easy on them.

When it comes down to the bottom line, elected officials and their staff expect you to eventually present them with an issue and a specific solution to that issue. Otherwise, why are you communicating with them? I can't think how many times as a legislative staff person I had meetings I just thought were a complete waste of time because no one asked me for anything.

So how are the critics partially right? Well, I guess if you're communicating with your elected officials frequently then you can afford to spend some of those communications on the niceties. And since everyone SHOULD be communicating frequently with their elected officials, then we all should be spending time on the niceties. But in the real world, where we might reach out a couple times per year, making the ask is an essential component of getting what we want from our government. And isn't that what it's all about?