

Communicating with Congress Conference



CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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CONGRESSIONAL
MANAGEMENT
FOUNDATION

*Celebrating 30 Years
of Service to Congress:*

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Communicating with Congress

How Capitol Hill is Coping
with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy

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Summary of Key Findings

Findings and Analysis

- **Congress received four times more communications in 2004 than 1995—all of the increase from Internet-based communications.**¹ Congress received 200,388,993 communications in 2004: the House received 10,400,000 communications by post and 99,053,399 via the Internet; the Senate received 7,935,594 by post and 83,000,000 via the Internet. During this decade, the staffing levels of Members' personal offices have not changed.
- **Congressional offices are devoting more resources to managing the growing volume of constituent communications.** Of managers surveyed, 73% say their offices spend more time on constituent communications than two years ago. Half of House and Senate senior managers surveyed also report their offices have reallocated resources to responding to communications over the last two years. However, only 17% of House offices and 38% of Senate offices answer all incoming e-mail with e-mail. The large majority of offices respond to some or all of their e-mail with postal letters.
- **The Internet is generally having a positive effect on the discourse between citizens and Congress.** A large majority of congressional staff surveyed, 79%, believe the Internet has made it easier for citizens to become involved in public policy; 55% believe it has increased public understanding of what goes on in Washington; and a plurality of 48% believe it has made Members more responsive to their constituents.
- **Many congressional staff doubt the legitimacy of identical form communications, and want to know whether communications are sent with constituents' knowledge and consent.** Half of congressional staff surveyed believe identical form communications are not sent with constituents' knowledge or consent. Another 25% are unsure about the legitimacy of these communications. Additionally, 89% would like the ability to differentiate form communications generated from membership lists from those sent through direct constituent action.
- **Personalized or individualized messages to Congress have more influence on Members' decision-making process than do identical form messages.** Only 3% of staff surveyed say identical form postal mail would have "a lot" of influence on their Member of Congress if he/she had not reached a decision. In contrast, 44% report individualized postal letters would have "a lot" of influence.
- **People who engage in political activities online or who write to their elected officials are very likely to be active members of their communities.** Citizens who write or call their elected officials are about six times more likely than the general public to belong to a group trying to influence public policy or to attend a political rally, speech or protest; three times more likely to write an article for a magazine or newspaper; and four times more likely to work for a political party. Consequently, constituents who write Congress tend to be politically active and have disproportionate political influence in their communities.²

Implications for Citizens and the Grassroots Community

1. **Quality is more persuasive than quantity.** Thoughtful, personalized constituent messages generally have more influence than a large number of identical form messages. Grassroots campaigns should consider placing greater emphasis on generating messages of higher quality and reducing form communications.

¹ Includes only postal mail and e-mail communications. Aggregate data on faxes and phone calls is not available.

² The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet, *Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign* (2004) <http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/political%20influentials.pdf> and unpublished data collected for this report.

2. **The organization behind a grassroots campaign matters.** Grassroots organizations should consider identifying the source of each campaign.
3. **Grassroots organizations should develop a better understanding of Congress.** The quality and impact of constituent communications would increase if organizations generating mass mail campaigns better understood Congress and the legislative process and adapted their efforts to the way congressional offices operate.
4. **There is a difference between being noticed and having an impact.** Bad grassroots practices may get noticed on Capitol Hill, but they tend not to be effective in influencing the opinions of Members of Congress, and sometimes damage the relationship between congressional offices and grassroots organizations.

Implications for Congress

1. **There is a new communications environment to which Congress will need to adapt.** The Internet has gone far beyond simply providing new tools to perform old tasks. In order to adapt to the new environment that the Internet has created, Congress must adopt an entirely new communications paradigm.
2. **Congress must improve online communications.** Members of Congress should improve the timeliness of their responses, reach out to grassroots organizations to help identify better means for communicating, and answer e-mail with e-mail.
3. **Managing in the new environment may require new capabilities and new thinking.** Congress should consider: providing Members with additional staff and resources to manage the rapidly growing volume of constituent communications; expanding the use of technology; adopting new management policies and/or establishing a task force to identify solutions to the growing communications challenges.
4. **The new environment provides benefits that Members of Congress and their staffs have not yet fully appreciated.** By embracing new communications tools, each Member could: connect to thousands more constituents; better connect to politically active citizens; save money; improve their image; and learn to better operate in the Information Age.



Panel 1—The Process: How Do Messages Get from Citizens to Capitol Hill and Back?

Panelists

Doug Pinkham—Public Affairs Council

Mark Reilly—Vocus Software

Michael Modica—House Information Resources

Bill Sweeney—Office of Senator Debbie Stabenow

Grassroots and the Rise of Citizen Involvement

Doug Pinkham
President
Public Affairs Council

“Grassroots” is a term used commonly by everyone working in politics. In a grassroots issue campaign, an organizing body (e.g., an interest group, an association, a coalition or a company) encourages people to contact lawmakers in order to express their views and demonstrate the breadth of political support behind an issue.

Grassroots organizations of all types have existed for many years. But the advent of email and the Internet revolutionized the way grassroots campaigns were conducted.

In 1999 the Public Affairs Council published *Creating a Digital Democracy: The Impact of the Internet on Public Policy-Making*. This report concluded – among other things – that the Internet would increase transparency of both public and private institutions, give the media new tools to report the news, facilitate access to raw information and misinformation, and provide activists with the most effective tool ever created for organizing people.

While all of these predictions have come true, none has been more dramatic than the impact of the Internet on grassroots. Grassroots organizations – representing every conceivable cause, industry or point of view – have proliferated over the past 10 years. The Internet has allowed like-minded people to find each other, stay in touch, increase awareness of issues, and organize campaigns designed to influence public policy.

Most of this growth has occurred in the public interest group sector, where the low cost of Internet campaigns has allowed non-profits to have a much louder voice on the public stage. Some of the most sophisticated grassroots Web sites run by activists track issues through RSS feeds, provide interactive databases to spur legislative involvement, publish educational materials for consumers and the general public, tie together state/local and national grassroots campaigns, and encourage supporters to “tell a friend” who also might be persuaded to enlist in a grassroots effort.

In other sectors the use of grassroots tools has expanded rapidly as well. According to a recent Public Affairs Council *Grassroots Benchmarking Report*, roughly 74% of companies and 100% of associations now have grassroots programs in place.

The good news, then, is that the barriers to entry in the marketplace of ideas have been removed and the free-flow of information has been enabled. The bad news is, of course, that the removal of those same barriers has also made it possible for *everyone* to become a citizen activist. The result is an overwhelming amount of constituent mail, email, faxes, phone calls and visits to members of Congress.

In the corporate world, grassroots programs have gained popularity over the past two decades as a way to engage stakeholders (including employees, community leaders and others) in legislative debates. The expectation of such initiatives is that the lawmaker will consider the position of these collective constituents when forming an opinion on an issue or, ultimately, when casting a vote.

Until recent years, many companies and associations considered grassroots a step child of lobbying. Grassroots programs were not very sophisticated (especially compared with those conducted in the activist world) and rarely would full-time staff be devoted to grassroots administration. When faced with a crisis, companies and associations would send out an

emergency call-to-action to employees or members, hoping that a sufficient number of lawmakers would be reached and that somehow this strategy would have a political impact.

But as information technology leveled the political playing field, corporations began to understand that having a smart and well-connected lobbying staff didn't guarantee that the company's position would be heard. In addition, a fair number of grassroots campaigns became anti-corporate in tone, which called for a response that was equally timely and constituent-based.

The result has been the launch of thousands of new grassroots programs in the corporate and association sectors. Because companies tend to be more cautious in their communications than public interest groups, corporate programs often lack the pizzazz of a campaign by Moveon.org, the NRA or the Human Rights Campaign. Nevertheless they still contain the same grassroots building blocks: a clear statement of the issue, a call to action, a locate-your-elected-representative feature, background information, and a deadline.

Software products, now ubiquitous in the grassroots field, help companies and associations build grassroots support, track response rates, measure the timeliness of communications and monitor which congressional offices were contacted. These products have increased the reach and frequency of all grassroots campaigns.

Based on our research, companies and associations have learned a number of important lessons about effective grassroots campaigns:

- It's better to spend the time educating your supporters on the issues over the long-term, so that when you want to launch a campaign people are prepared and motivated to tell their story to their elected representatives.
- The best campaigns enlist the support of like-minded public interest groups, community leaders, retirees and others outside the immediate corporate family.
- Grassroots techniques can be used not only at the national level, but also at the state, local and even international level.
- Some of the most innovative grassroots campaigns integrate media outreach with political outreach. They use issue advertising, special events and op-ed articles – not to mention videos on YouTube, podcasts and entertaining animation on their Web sites.
- Most important, companies and associations know that an effective grassroots campaign must be honest and credible. Real people must feel individually motivated to write real letters and emails to their members of Congress. Over the years there have been media reports of so-called "Astroturf" campaigns, in which consultants were paid to create the illusion of constituent support. Any reputable lobbyist or grassroots organization (including corporations and associations) knows that this approach is both unethical and self-defeating.

Trendlines indicate that grassroots programs by both non-profits and companies will continue to expand in the years ahead – and the reasons why go beyond the ease with which a grassroots campaign can be launched. For one thing, public policy issues are becoming increasingly high-stakes, which motivates all sorts of groups to weigh in. At the same time, many of these issues – from trade promotion authority to stem cell research to environmental restrictions – are also becoming increasingly complex, which means that there will be an even more urgent need in congressional offices to figure out "what the voters really want" back home. The result will be even more constituent mail, email, faxes, phone calls and visits to members of Congress.

While some may argue that the exponential growth of grassroots will eventually negate the effectiveness of *all* forms of citizen communication, lawmakers ignore such communication at their own peril. When people are motivated enough to communicate with Congress, they not only expect a response. They also expect that their opinions will be considered. Anything less will only exacerbate public disaffection with government.

The Public Affairs Council is the leading association for public affairs professionals. This non-partisan, non-political organization provides unique information, training and other resources to its members to support their effective participation in government and community relations activities at all levels. More than 600 member companies and associations work together through the Council to enhance the value and professionalism of the public affairs practice, and to provide thoughtful leadership as corporate citizens. For more information, visit our Web site at www.pac.org.

Who Uses Online Advocacy Software & How Does Work?

Mark Reilly

Director

Government Relations Professional Services

Vocus Software

Good morning and thank you for attending this conference sponsored by the Congressional Management Foundation.

My name is Mark Reilly and I work for Vocus Software, one of the seven leading online advocacy software vendors that make up the industry coalition participating in this event. It's my pleasure to be here today to talk about what online advocacy software is, who uses it, and how it works, as well as answer any questions you may have about the general processes used in online advocacy software.

First I would like to provide some background on the online advocacy software industry to provide some context for how the technologies and features were developed.

Online advocacy and online advocacy software is an extension of advocacy activities that have been in place since the founding of our nation. Organizations, companies and groups of concerned citizens have been mobilizing their supporters to petition Congress by sending letters, making phone calls, sending faxes, postcards, even bricks, on the issues important to them long before "Internet" and "Google" were words in the English language. So, while we are talking today about how online advocacy software works and the challenges we face today in handling the volume and veracity of electronic communications from citizens to Hill offices, it is important to understand that the underlying forces driving this process are not new, and in fact are as old as Congress itself.

The online advocacy software market began in middle 1990's with the advent and popular use of the Internet. As soon as Federal and state officials began to publish email addresses, citizens began to communicate their ideas, positions and concerns to those elected officials on the issues important to them. By the late 1990's Internet use began to spread rapidly and those organizations who mobilized their supporters to advocate their positions to Congress such as trade associations, corporations, faith based organizations, issue advocacy groups, non-profits, and unions began to look to the Internet as means to better communicate to, organize, and mobilize their supporters. These organizations understood that their supporters were interested and cared about the issues, but did not have the time or focus to watch the legislative process on Capitol Hill closely. These advocacy organizations wanted technology that could harness the passion of their supporters and allow these citizens to easily learn about the issues at hand, as well as send a message to their elected officials on that issue. These organizations also realized that simply directing people to send a message to the email address of their elected official did not allow them to track and monitor the effectiveness of their advocacy campaign. These needs created a market for software companies, including several in this coalition, to create and sell online advocacy software.

Next I'd like to talk about the basic components of the typical online advocacy software package available today.

Online advocacy software enables organizations to communicate and educate their supporters by email and web pages, mobilize those supporters to communicate with their elected officials by sending emails to Congress (as well as faxes, letters, phone calls, etc.), while tracking those activities so that the advocacy organization can better understand which of their supporters are taking action and which are not. Tracking the advocacy activity of their supporters allows the

advocacy organization to know which Members of Congress are receiving messages from their supporters and helps them decide where to expend future resources.

There are four main components common to the online advocacy software provided by most vendors in the industry.

One: A member database that stores supporter information, matches supporter home addresses to their legislators, and tracks supporter activities. This database generally also includes contact information for elected officials used by the software.

Two: An email alert system that sends out emails to supporters alerting them to important news, updates or asking them to take action. These emails help clients educate their supporters and can include links that drives supporters to action-taking web pages.

Three: Ability to create and manage action taking pages that are accessible online. These web pages are where supporters are provided more background on an issue and the ability to send a message to their elected officials. The sample letters or talking points are displayed to supporters for their review prior to their sending them to their elected officials. In addition, many clients provide their supporters with the ability to edit all or a portion of the sample letter, so as to allow the supporter to provide their personal message within the message sent to the elected officials.

Four: Reporting and tracking capabilities for the advocacy organization on supporter activity. These reports allow the organization to better understand which of their supporters are taking action and on which issues. This information is critical to their ability to improve their grassroots/advocacy programs.

(Slide 4 of the accompanying presentation provides a diagram of this process.)

While these four components describe the basic components of the software package, I'd also like to spend a little time describing a typical scenario that describes how our clients use our software platforms.

A Committee Chairwoman has decided to hold a committee meeting next week to vote on proposed amendments a bill important to an advocacy organization using an online advocacy software package. The Grassroots Director is informed by his colleague the Legislative Director of the committee's decision to vote on the bill next week and quickly begins creating the components of his grassroots campaign to apply as much pressure from his activists as he can.

Using his online advocacy software he creates an outbound email to send to supporters, that provides background information on the bill and why the organization supports its passage. The email also includes a link to an action-taking page on the organization's web site. He then creates the action-taking page that provides a sample letter that can be edited by supporters and sent electronically to the targeted Members of Congress on the committee.

The Grassroots Director then sends the message to the supporters who live in the political districts (or states) of the Members of Congress who sit on the committee in question. Then email provides them some basic background information on the bill and asks that they take action by following a link to the action-taking page on the organization's web site.

The supporters receive the emails, and about half open them and read the content provided. Some of those supporters decide to follow the link to the action-taking page and review the letter and content. After editing (or not) the sample letter provided by the organization, the supporter clicks the send letter button, is told who they just sent their message to, and is thanked for talking action.

Behind the scenes, the online advocacy software adds the supporter's name and address to the letter s/he just edited and posts it to the correct web form used by the elected official on the committee of the respective supporters who took action. That information is tracked and stored in the online advocacy software database for the Grassroots Director to access for reports.

This process or progression is often described in the grassroots industry as **recruit, educate, engage** and **mobilize**. The relevance of this progression is that while the organizations that use online advocacy software want to mobilize as many supporters as they can to send messages to Members of Congress, the number of messages sent is not the only goal. Rather, the overwhelming majority of our clients understand that in order to sustain the interest of their supporters in their advocacy programs, they must build a relationship by educating their supporters on the issue prior to asking them to act. As software developers this means that our software needs to be designed to help organizations create and sustain a relationship with their supporters that are more than just a single message sent to Congress on a single issue.

There are some simple ways that this long-term relationship view is manifested in the software we develop. A few examples are the following:

All names and addresses stored within the member database are from individuals who have opted-in to the grassroots program or are members/employees of the organization.

Our clients and our software matches supporters to their home address since this is where they vote and it determines which elected officials they should communicate with by default. Clients want the home address of their supporters since they may decide to send them physical mail asking for donations or to attend real-world events. There is therefore no incentive to use fake addresses or collected addresses that are not in fact real home addresses of their supporters.

In all email communications sent to supporters asking them to take action the option for the supporter (email recipient) to opt-out of future emails is included in the email as best practice. This means that supporters can ask to not receive future communications at any time and are removed from the organization's email lists.

In order for a supporter to send a message they must login (verifying who they are) and proactively "click" a button to send a message to their elected official at a minimum. They are often asked to personalize the message or provide more information. This ensures that a real person is opting-in to proactively send their message to their elected official.

In total, we believe that these software features act as reasonable safeguards to stop or at least limit the ability of unscrupulous advocacy organizations to abuse the process of sending messages electronically to Congress. Clearly there are "rogue" advocacy software vendors and custom-built solutions used by other organizations, who are not members of this coalition, who may not enforce or subscribe to the provisions described above and in the accompany presentation. This is one of the primary reasons that we, as members of the Communicating with Congress Working Group, want to further engage Congress in discussions about how to best resolve the challenges both sides face in managing electronic communications from constituents to their elected officials.

I hope that this testimony and accompany presentation have provided more insight into the online advocacy software industry and its processes. It has been my pleasure to provide this testimony and look forward to working with Congress, the Congressional Management Foundation, our clients and the other organizations involved in communicating with Congress to work toward a better dialogue and working relationships in regards to delivering electronic message to Congressional offices.

Thank you.

Correspondence Management Software

Michael Modica

Customer Manager

House Information Resources

Correspondence Management Software (CMS)

Introduction

- ▶ The volume of constituent letters, e-mails, phone calls and faxes to the House continues to increase.
- ▶ A large part of that volume is proportional to the major legislative issues before the House of Representatives.
- ▶ Constituents are increasingly contacting their Representative through modern methods (E-mail/Internet).
- ▶ The Internet makes it easier for non-constituents to communicate with Representatives
- ▶ Using modern-day tools is imperative for handling constituent communications effectively.

Correspondence Challenges

- ▶ The ability for Member offices to manage large volumes of constituent correspondence is a critical function for the office.
- ▶ Members receive a disproportionate amount of correspondence from outside their congressional districts
- ▶ Member Offices have limited resources for handling correspondence.

Statistics: House Mail (Postal)

- ▶ The following statistics are the yearly totals of all classes of postal mail:

Year	Total
2006	9,358,106
2005	11,200,779
2004	10,413,328
2003	12,704,881
2002	11,836,052

Statistics: House Emails (2006)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
In - Bound	9,076,069	9,835,185	11,493,049	10,385,674	12,545,492	12,666,868
Out - Bound	10,546,494	11,125,145	12,957,403	11,598,367	13,868,608	14,161,204

	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
In - Bound	10,466,056	11,361,002	9,028,997	11,303,762	13,040,364	11,693,936
Out - Bound	11,976,300	12,837,556	10,535,967	12,830,170	14,050,120	11,142,736

Correspondence Management System (CMS)

- ▶ The CMS is a Constituent Relationship Management System.
- ▶ The House offers a variety of vendor-provided CMS solutions to Member offices.
- ▶ The CMS solutions range from basic to advance functionality, offering abilities to manage constituent correspondence and workflow.
- ▶ CMS provides basic modules to track constituent communications and casework, generate individual responses, conduct targeted outreach, and report generation.

Advanced CMS Features

- ▶ Newer components now allow for integration of email, digital mail, faxes, and web-based solutions.
- ▶ Extra features to organize office operations for workflow by including components for press operations, scheduling, legislative tracking, and office accounting.
- ▶ Integrated document management solutions using Microsoft SharePoint.

Tools for Managing E-Mail

- ▶ Write Your Representative (WYR)
 - WYR allows constituents to send online correspondence to your office. The messages received can be sent directly to your Constituent Management System (CMS).
- ▶ Listserv
 - Listserv is used to create and maintain constituent e-mail distribution lists. Visitors can subscribe and unsubscribe to your list online.
- ▶ Enterprise Spam Filtering Service –
 - Designed to dramatically reduce unsolicited e-mail (spam).
 - Does not require desktop installation and is available for all House Members, Officers, Committees and staff to control spam.
- ▶ Enterprise Fax Service
 - Comprised of two distinct services -- Outbound and Inbound Delivery.
 - Outbound allows you to send faxes from Outlook and Inbound Delivery allows you to receive and manage faxes in Outlook.

Member Offices

- ▶ The demographics of the individual congressional districts, staff capability and experience and Member communication style determines how an office manages constituent correspondence.
- ▶ Not all Congressional offices fully utilize the features offered in CMS products today.
- ▶ It's up to each Member office to determine the best approach for managing communications.

Conclusion

- ▶ Correspondence to House offices is continually increasing.
- ▶ Timely management of correspondence is critical.
- ▶ CMS is an important tool that helps Member offices manage their correspondence.
- ▶ Electronic tools available to help staff manage the flow of mail.
- ▶ The staff's ability to utilize available tools can translate into success.

The Mail Process in a Senate Office

Bill Sweeney

Director of Information Technology

Office of Senator Debbie Stabenow

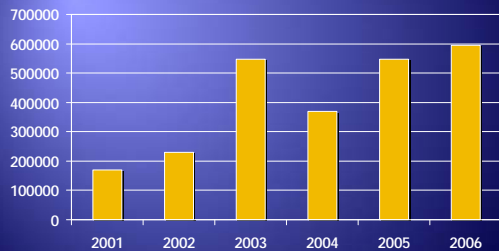
THE MAIL PROCESS IN A SENATE OFFICE

Bill Sweeney
Office of Senator Debbie Stabenow

Mail Volume Trends

- ◆ Over 4 million letters since 2001
- ◆ 595,565 letters in 2006 alone
- ◆ Approx. 500 phone calls to DC daily
- ◆ Most mail comes in Jan-July
- ◆ Postal volume sharply decreased
- ◆ E-mail volume steadily increasing
- ◆ Fax volume increasing

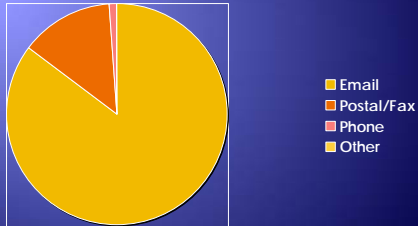
Mail volume over 6 years



Letters must be approved

- ♦ LC drafts response
- ♦ Legislative Assistant approves/ fact-checks
- ♦ Letter checked for style/grammar
- ♦ Legislative Director and/or Chief of Staff approves
- ♦ Senator approves
- ♦ Whole staff reviews

85% of mail is e-mail



Mail Staff

- ♦ 1 Mailroom Manager
- ♦ 1 Data Entry Staff
- ♦ 6 Legislative Correspondents

Process for Postal Mail

- ◆ Letters arrive screened/irradiated/opened by Senate personnel
- ◆ Mailroom Manager sorts, tags, and codes letters
- ◆ Data entry staff adds info to database
- ◆ LC assigns letter
- ◆ Office prints letter offsite
- ◆ Letter checked and mailed

Process for faxes

- ◆ Mailroom manager sorts faxes in electronic fax program
- ◆ Constituent faxes printed
- ◆ Constituent faxes entered into database
- ◆ LC assigns letter
- ◆ Office prints letter offsite
- ◆ Letter checked and mailed

Process for phone calls

- ◆ Call taken by Staff Assistants
- ◆ Callers not wanting response have their comments tallied
- ◆ Callers wanting a response have information data entered by SA
- ◆ LC assigns letter
- ◆ Office prints letter offsite
- ◆ Letter checked and mailed

Process for e-mails

- ♦ E-mail arrives in the office; database automatically routes to appropriate staff person based on issue code
- ♦ LC assigns letter
- ♦ Letter e-mailed back

Emails get fast response

- ♦ Vast majority of e-mails get responses within 24 hours
- ♦ No data entry required
- ♦ Staff can process quickly
- ♦ Senator gets tallies quickly

Printed mail gets slowest response

- ♦ Most printed mail (postal/faxes) take several weeks to process
- ♦ Postal delays for screening process
- ♦ Labor-intensive data entry
- ♦ Waiting for printing and return mail

Continuing Dialogue

- ♦ Office e-mails follow up with updates on legislation
- ♦ Office builds relationships with constituents without having to purchase lists

Notes



Panel 2—The Problems: What About Constituent Communications Isn't Working?

Panelists

John Wonderlich—The Sunlight Foundation

Grace Markarian—The Humane Society of the United States

Alan Rosenblatt—Center for American Progress Action Fund

Judson Blewett—Office of Senator John Cornyn

Mike Panetta—Grassroots Enterprise

What About Constituent Communications Isn't Working?

John Wonderlich
Program Director
The Sunlight Foundation

As technology makes accessing information increasingly convenient, society will expect better information from its political institutions. Congress stands at the center of these expectations, the primary target of national civic activism. Our national legislature is probably among the institutions most affected by lowered communications barriers, and, at the same time, is organizationally limited from rapidly adapting to the increased pressure of this new communications environment.

This slow adaptation is to be expected, given the broad latitude each congressional office has in its management practices, Congress's general need to adopt new practices cautiously, and the fact that citizens are entirely justified in demanding accountability from their representatives and engaging in the democratic process. The communications bottleneck between citizens and Congress has foundations beyond this technological disconnect, however. This theoretical gap between the public and Congress online is only partly caused by society's ability to freely adopt new technology with comparatively little investment or risk.

Citizens' ability to access meaningful legislative information plays a formative role in the content and function of constituent communications. Public legislative information access helps to answer the questions "What should I expect from my congressional representatives?" and "What might I ask of my constituents" (communications expectations) and also "How can I affect Congress?", determining the forms of civic activism that are legislatively relevant.

Public Congressional Information Access

While ongoing IT upgrades have made major gains, effective real-time legislative information remains out of reach to citizens online. While both political parties have, in turn, implemented significant programs to enhance public access, transitions from legacy systems aren't simple, often requiring new appropriations, broad coordination between agencies, committees, and administrative offices, and a sustained commitment to transparent accessible government.

Despite the significant investment that has gone into THOMAS, LOC, GPO Access, the NDIIPP, the XML transition committee, NARA, GAO, and CBO, SOPR, or the Legislative Resource Center, among many others, constituent information expectations still outpace technical realities. Internet users increasingly expect to find high-quality streaming and archived video, structured data sources, RSS feeds, real-time data updates, centrally aggregated scheduling information, all broadly archived, indexed, and tagged.

In the absence of this sort of comprehensive legislative data portal, citizens rely on news reports, which often omit even basic details, like bill numbers or simple procedural explanations. The only other option is to rely on subscription services, which can provide the information necessary for legislative relevance, but only at prohibitive expense.

Access and Clear Communications Expectations

When representatives and constituents rely on similar information sources, comprehension and accountability can mitigate some legislative communications issues. While legislative substance can affect the content of constituent communications, the form and format that email exchanges take should also be examined. In the absence of clear standards about what should

be expected of an elected official, or of those seeking to influence them, mistrust and frustration too often take the place of meaningful dialogue.

Examining the technical form of email and other congressional communications raises other similarly fundamental issues about the tension between representative democracy and the direct structure of the Internet. To what degree is a member of Congress responsible for responding to constituents? Does the party or administrative Congressional leadership have a responsibility to standardize IT resources, or even to provide them at all? What body is best suited to determine an appropriate balance between responsive constituent communications and maintaining appropriate member discretion? Is it entirely incumbent on petitioners to determine the most effective form for their campaigns, or does Congress have something to gain from (or responsibility for) developing (or encouraging) new communications methods?

Access Begets New Forms of Activism

More clear, however, is the potentially transformative effect the Internet is having on activism. Civic engagement is moving beyond “call or write your Senator or Representative” to something else. The fertile landscape of e-government is delivering new methods for meaningful public engagement.

Tools like pledgebank.org or hearfromyourmp.org take an individual commitment or inquiry and multiply it across a relevant set of similarly minded citizens who are either from the same district or share the same goals. Websites like these, especially through the British site mysociety.org, are demonstrating new ways to create legislative relevance without causing administrative strain.

The United States Patent Office has also begun experimenting with the potential benefits of empowering citizens through digital public access, as they recently launched a program to integrate citizen researchers into the patent examination process. Preliminary experimentation with including an extra-electoral component to legislative deliberations was undertaken by Sen. Durbin, who recently engaged in broad bipartisan discourse over telecommunications legislation.

While these examples don't present an immediate solution to the email issues that Congress faces, they do suggest that a solution to the communications needs of an online world should involve the information demands of digitally empowered constituents. Information access is integrally linked to constituent communications, and as expectations grow for one, the other similarly gains relevance.

What About Constituent Communications Isn't Working?

Grace Markarian
Online Communications Manager
Humane Society of the United States

Hello, I'm Grace Markarian. I am the Online Communications Manager for the Humane Society of the United States. I'm here to represent my organization and also here as a representative of the Don't Block My Voice Coalition.

I want to thank the Congressional Management Foundation and the other sponsors for bring everyone together to discuss the issue at hand. And thank you to the congressional staff in attendance. I believe that the goals of advocacy groups like mine, the individuals and families that form our membership, and our public servants in Congress are not at odds.

We want to move policy change forward in order to improve lives. In short, we want to change the world. And for all of us to do that, we will need to work together. Even if we come down on different sides of a particular issue, we all respect our democratic system and respect the views and opinions of our citizens and decision makers.

The Humane Society of the United States is the nation's largest and most powerful animal protection organization—backed by ten million Americans, or one in every 30. We were established in 1954, and are a mainstream force against cruelty, exploitation, and neglect.

We advocate for public policies to protect animals, investigate cruelty and work to enforce existing laws, educate the public about the issues, and conduct hands-on programs. We lead a disaster relief agency for animals, and we provide direct care for thousands of animals at our sanctuaries, wildlife rehabilitation centers, and mobile veterinary clinics.

To advance our public policy agenda, we lobby elected officials on the local, state, and federal level. In addition to the direct lobbying of our staff, we host frequent events around the country to educate citizens on effective lobbying techniques. We also utilize the Internet through our website, humanesociety.org, our online action campaigns, and social networks to reach out and recruit people to our cause. Our members, in turn, tell their friends and family about our work and encourage them to join in.

Our online community has grown sharply over the past four years. National crises like Hurricane Katrina and high-interest issues like Michael Vick's indictment on dogfighting charges have also drawn many people looking for information and ways they can help. Our community is now over a million strong and we are constantly evaluating the best ways to reach our members and, in turn, help them effectively advocate for reforms on behalf of animals.

One of our mantras is "send the right message to the right person at the right time," which means we take care to make our messages relevant, personal and timely. We use constituent matching and demonstrated interest areas to segment our audience and time our grassroots pushes strategically to coincide with legislative action; a bill introduction, hearing, vote, etc.

We are keenly aware that our activities translate into a huge influx of phone calls and emails into Congressional offices. Since our online advocates are trying to sway their members of Congress to take a certain action, it behooves us to use the tools we're providing our online community to their best advantage, such as setting our online action forms to match the address data input by the advocate with their members of Congress. We also take pains to educate our advocates about the legislative process. For example, if their member has already co-

sponsored a bill we support, thank him or her. If not, urge him or her to do so. Savvy advocates are better advocates.

Another goal of our online program is to move advocates up the “engagement ladder.” The first rung of that is signing up through our website or at an event, or from a friend’s recommendation. The next is opening one of our emails and taking action online to communicate with their members of Congress. The next might be telling one of their friends about a specific issue and urging them to take action. A phone call to their elected officials might be their next action, and then a personal visit. All the way to writing letters to the editor, organizing community events and volunteering.

By educating citizens about the civic process through which they can effect change and then putting them in touch with their elected representatives, we contribute to our nation’s sense of civic duty and pride. Each citizen has something to say and when their government listens and responds, it reinforces the public trust. Even if the response is in disagreement with the citizen’s position, the fact that someone is listening and respectful again reinforces the faith we have in our government by the people and for the people.

The Don’t Block My Voice coalition was formed in response to the adoption by some congressional offices of logic puzzles, or CAPTCHA devices. We’re fortunate to have organizations from all ranges of the political spectrum in the coalition. And while the members of the coalition recognize that, in some instances, offices wish to block messages organized by nonprofits like mine out of sheer desperation to reduce the flood of constituent communications, we’re alarmed by the disregard paid to these constituent communications by some offices. These are real messages from real people with real views. The fact that the message was facilitated by an advocacy group does not reduce the authenticity, or the sentiment behind it. Nor should you believe the message is inauthentic just because many people elect to leave a standardized message unchanged and send it without personal comments, or because you get a large number of messages at one time.

Citizens turn to advocacy groups to educate them about important issues, put them in contact with others who share their concerns, and act together so they speak with a stronger voice. This has always been the role of organizations like mine. Our members once communicated with their lawmakers through paper petitions, post card campaigns, snail mail letters, faxes and phone calls.

Today, this exchange of ideas is taking place online. When people who care about animals learn about an issue before Congress that will affect animals (either positively or negatively), they want to take action. And when they want to take action, they want to take action right then. The Internet has made that possible, and by doing so has expanded the civic participation of busy Americans who may not have the time—between all their other life activities—to become very active volunteers for nonprofits. Unlike snail-mail communication, the rapid distribution of online information allows busy Americans to communicate at just the time when their thoughts most matter to lawmakers—right before a vote or other action. The internet also facilitates the “viral” circulation of information, so that at key points in the process you may well get tens of thousands of communications in a matter of hours (or even minutes) on issues that people identify as their top concerns.

Lawmakers and advocacy organizations share a belief that expanded democratic participation is good. We share a belief that we should always try to “send the right message to the right person at the right time.” We also share an understanding that current technologies for managing an increased flow of constituent contact are inadequate. We hope we share the belief that limiting those constituent contacts is not a solution—but that with honest discussion and creative technological options, we can agree on a solution.

Of Problems, Obligations, and Opportunities

Alan Rosenblatt, Ph.D.

Center for American Progress Action Fund

When the Congressional Management Foundation released its findings that 75% of congressional staffers thought that the form emails they received from constituents were either fake (50%) or not sure if they were real (25%), I immediately contacted MoveOn.org and suggested that they launch a campaign to get their millions of members to send emails to Congress saying their form emails were authentic. I thought such an outpouring would put to rest any doubts. I got no response.

About six months later, I approached Care2 with the same proposition. Instead of taking my suggested blunt course of action, I arranged a meeting between Care2 and CMF. This meeting was one of the early seeds that resulted in two coalitions to address the issue, one comprising vendor and the other advocacy organizations. In the year and a half since, there have been meetings between the coalitions and representatives from Congress, but it is unclear if much has changed.

From the perspective of Congress, the email explosion is a problem. Office staff and technology budgets have not increased in twenty years, while communication from constituents, especially driven by email, has more than quadrupled. Clearly this is a capacity issue. But it is also a political issue.

The prevailing political environment in the nation frowns heavily whenever Congress gives itself a pay raise. The problem is that Member salaries are lumped together with administrative budgets in the eyes of the public. The citizenry rarely understand that congressional staff is notoriously underpaid and that the technology in these offices are rarely up to date. Until such time that administrative budgets are uncoupled from Member salaries, this political barrier will remain an issue.

From the perspective of advocacy groups, organizing citizens into memberships that write to Congress to promote their shared policy goals is crucial to their missions. And while it would be great if the groups could rely on their activists to stay on message when writing to Congress, they feel they do not have that luxury. Senators and Representatives respond with their votes to constituents when constituents are specific regarding bill numbers. And they are responsive to well reasoned arguments, at least in principle. So advocacy groups feel compelled to write the letters to Congress for their activists in order to ensure their communications stay “on message.”

Now, rarely do advocacy groups lock down the letter text. Activists are almost always free to edit the letters and put them in their own words. But many do not, either because they do not have time, do not feel confident, do not know they have the option, do not want to, or feel that the letter as written is perfectly suited to the task. Regardless of the reasons, few will personalize. And fewer still will change the subject line of the email (which often gives the appearance that they have not edited the letter if staffers do not open the email).

From the advocacy software vendors’ perspective, providing tools to advocacy groups that allow them to take a proactive role in crafting the messages its members send to Congress is their bread and butter. It is this administrative control that helps vendors sell their products to advocacy groups (along with the integration of a constituent relations management database). The harder Congress makes it for advocacy groups to use this software, the less reason they have to buy it in the first place.

From a citizen's perspective, this whole affair is insulting. After all, the First Amendment guarantees each of us the right "to petition the Government for redress of grievances." This right does not limit the channels of communication. Yet Congress seems to be doing just that when they impose logic puzzles, which require math literacy, on citizens; when they block email from the IP addresses of advocacy software vendors; or when they "select all and delete" messages with the same subject line.

Citizens have the unlimited right to communicate with their elected representatives. And they have the right to rely on advocacy organizations to track legislation for them, provide research to them, and write text for them to send to Congress. After all, every Member of Congress has a staff that tracks legislation, does research, and writes text for both the bills and the emails sent back to constituents. What is good for the goose must be good for the gander, especially if we believe in due process under the law.

Back to My Personal Journey

Continuing my personal story as I reacted to CMF's study, after meeting with Care2 and CMF, I sent an email to my Senator at the time, George Allen. I explained to him that I have often sent emails to him, Senator Warner, and Congressman Moran. Sometimes I put the emails in my own words, I explained, but other times I forwarded a form letter. I assured him that all these emails were, indeed, from me. I further explained that I always got a reply from Representative Moran, usually from Senator Warner, but NEVER from Senator Allen.

Within an hour I received a detailed email apologizing and responding to a few of the issues I mentioned in my email. Clearly I had struck a nerve. But as amazing as this response was, I was hardly prepared to find when I arrived at home later that evening a voice message from the Senator's office.

It seems they had three different email addresses from me and would I please call them to reconcile their records. Now, I have more than three email addresses and they all work. And if they were trying to tell me that this was the reason they never replied to me, then they were offering a very poor excuse. Nothing stopped them from hitting reply to any of my emails. And all three emails were tied to the same street address if they wanted send me a letter by post.

Opportunities

Perhaps the biggest problem in this morass is that Congress, more often than not, seeks to manage their communications with constituents, often at arms' length. But email offers an enormous opportunity to deepen relations with constituents. Emails coming in to Congress contain not only digitized contact data for constituents, ready to import into their contact database, but also in depth information about what issues they care about, and in the case of form emails, what organizations they belong to. This is a gold mine of information that can help Members of Congress not only create deeper relations with constituents, but also help them better represent their interests. It is very sad that this golden opportunity often is seen as a problem.

Why Communicating With Congress Is a Pain

Judson Blewett
Information Technology Officer
Office of Senator John Cornyn

In a broad sense, most of the problems facing member offices with regards to communications stem from a central issue: the increase in volume of inbound messaging outpacing the ability of member offices to keep up resource-wise. This is, of course nothing new. Over the past two decades, advances in telecommunications technology have triggered an explosive growth in the volume of communications. Over the same time span, while the size of Congressional staffs and budgets have increased somewhat – it has not been nearly proportional to the numbers of citizens corresponding with their offices.

Third party communicants such as advocacy groups are exacerbating the problem. There are lots of different organizations doing different things in different ways for different reasons with different goals. Over the past few years, some of the largest of these organizations have started to make extremely proactive efforts to work with Member offices to ensure the delivery of their messages to Congress in the most effective fashion. Yet many have not – they continue to sling bulk messages in the general direction of their messaging targets with little or no regard to the issues this causes in responding, leading to frustration from offices and citizens alike. I empathize with the problems faced by organizations attempting to communicate with Congress, large and small. How am I supposed to get my message across to all these members? Should I just point and shoot and hope for the best? Or should I attempt the daunting task of attempting to co-ordinate with offices and committees individually? They seem to hate faxes, but's it's the only guarantee I have that something will arrive in their offices and be dealt with in a timely fashion.

We here in Congress aren't making things any easier. There are hundreds of member offices and committees with hundreds of different correspondence policies utilizing dozens of different software packages and systems to consolidate, classify and respond to all this inbound correspondence. The rules governing this process and the funding that supports it are at best obscure and vague. These same rules differ widely for committees, member offices, between the House and Senate and are completely undecipherable to most of us in Congress, let alone external organizations. Thus, the problems from our end: there's too much coming in!! How do I wring the most bang out of my buck? Who do I respond to, and who do I ignore? How do I prioritize that decision? How do I let hundreds of advocacy organizations like PACs and special interest groups know the requirements that our office has implemented to enable us to communicate and respond to as many concerned citizens as possible?

In preparing for this event, I collected comments from offices via the Senate Systems Administrators list regarding the difficulties they experience in dealing with inbound correspondence – the list I've compiled follows, in rough order:

- 1. Incorrectly formatted/routed inbound data:** formatting and routing or the lack thereof sounds like a simple problem. And on a single piece of correspondence, it may take no more than 20 seconds to fix. However, if you have 1,000 incorrectly formatted pieces of correspondence coming in via email, it's now going to take more than 5 hours to get them formatted properly. My office has 5 Legislative Correspondents, and receives 8,000-12,000 individual pieces of correspondence on an average week. Something like 50%-60% comes in with the wrong issue, or a messed up address, routed to the wrong person, etc. Do up the math on that, and you get the idea – most of the time spent in an average correspondence program is spent cleaning, sorting and routing.

- 2. Incorrect/inconvenient channel correspondence – fax or postcard campaigns, staff bombing, etc.** Essentially, another variant on the aforementioned problem but much more serious, as it can take up to a minute and a half to manually enter a single piece of correspondence into either of the correspondence management software packages I've worked with in the Senate. The same 1,000 messages sent as faxes as opposed to email will now take roughly 20 hours to log into the system. Postcards in particular are problematic – often, they do not go through high-speed scanners and they like very well, either vastly increasing the time it will take to log them into the system, or necessitating their disposal without response. Additionally, there are numerous instances every year where an advocacy group or lobby shop or radio show or other party gets ahold of the Congressional Directory and just starts blasting some hapless staffer with hundreds of emails. Regardless of whether or not that person is the right one to contact on the issue, it's being pushed into our offices in a highly inconvenient and often disruptive fashion.
- 3. The advocacy campaign stigma:** Frequently – one of our legislative correspondents will experience a huge spike in incoming correspondence – occasionally it can be more than double the average weekly incoming volume, all at once, all on one issue, all with identical or exceedingly similar wording. Obviously, an advocacy campaign is underway. When 5,000 identically worded emails come in across the span of 6-8 hours, to us that just smells funny right off the bat. There've been instances where our replies to an email campaign were greeted with angry protestations that the individual correspondent never contacted our office in the first place. There is a definite stigma associated with bulk communications on Capitol Hill. This is, I think, as much or more a consequence of the paranoia surrounding our increasingly bitter partisan political environment as it is a result of a few unscrupulous advocacy groups bulking themselves up with acquired data or questionable tactics. To my mind, it does not de-legitimize these contacts, but to many offices it does. Do I prioritize these as high as individual citizens that contacted us directly and took the time to compose their own letters? This ties back into the inconvenient channel issue previously mentioned. It can be an enormous problem – how does one sort the wheat from the chaff in these circumstances? There are currently no guarantees or safeguards that assure offices that an individual advocacy group is a 'safe' relayer of constituent correspondence. Not to mention the partisan vengeance factor that is increasingly coming in to play – organizations from the far other ideological extreme deliberately bombarding a member on the opposite side of an issue with thousands of vitriolic emails, faxes, letters, bricks, underwear, etc. via every available channel in a completely chaotic fashion that seems deliberately designed to cause the maximum disruption to the target correspondence program with little or no hope of altering opinion or stating a rational position.
- 4. Bulk out of state/not for me/outside our policy bounds correspondence:** There's this (as far as I'm aware) unwritten treaty between offices referred to as "Congressional Courtesy". It basically means that I won't answer correspondence or do casework on your turf, and you won't do it on mine. But it's not hard and fast – by way of example, when I worked for the Republican Majority Leader we answered anything from anyone anywhere, under the operating premise that leadership positions are national political positions, and thus necessitate national responses. But most offices will not directly address concerns of correspondents from outside their districts or states. Again – this is a function of the lack of available man hours. I need to concentrate on the needs and opinions of constituents who, let's face it, will wind up voting for or against my member in the next election cycle. But many advocacy organizations do not seem to care. National opinions are not as important to a member of Congress as the opinions of their constituencies – with noteworthy exceptions such as SOME leadership offices, committee members (on specific issues), etc. We call them 'buck letters' – we pass the

buck to another office. And we spend a lot of time doing it, these days. Direct your correspondence to the right offices so we don't have to waste our time and yours getting it where it needs to be. Of course, you have no way of knowing if we accept correspondence from out of state, so, y'know, good luck.

5. **Lack of relevant metadata with correspondence – campaign, source organization, issues, etc:** often, bulk correspondence will come thru an advocacy group webform, rigged to pass through the member/committee form. This often removes or omits valuable information such as organizational membership, or proper issue of interest. And now we're back to the first issue – someone must go in, and add or correct this information. Often, this can be done in bulk, but just as often it can involve time consuming detective and sorting work. This isn't just limited to bulk or 3rd party correspondence – individuals just flat pick the wrong issues plenty of the time. There will always be a need for human eyes to examine every single piece of correspondence, but the actual laying on of hands during the sorting and correcting process needs to be minimized. If an advocacy group relays correspondence to us about a specific issue, and we take action on that issue – you can bet we want to let that group know that we did something about it! But if they came in via form stuffing, it's unlikely that we've picked up the existence of the group, and may or may not respond properly. A lot of us would like to do better in this regard – target more accurately, respond more directly to advocacy campaigns.
6. **Lack of contacts within advocacy organizations:** so – an advocacy group has “broken the rules” so to speak. Never mind the fact that the rules are invisible to them at the moment. This group is sending my legislative director and chief of staff about 1,000 identically formatted emails a day. Now – we'd like to respond to these people, but they are coming in via the wrong door. And I personally have never yet seen an advocacy group clearly brand it's relayed messages by obviously saying 'This message is from a member of X'. So where are they coming from? Who do I call to say – look, this is not okay and really is not helping your case, and we'd like to respond, but locking up my boss' email account is not helping me do that? Easier to just engage the spam filters and bounce the stuff. That, or the average correspondence director or systems administrator now has a rather challenging bit of detective work in front of them – hunting a mysterious organization over the Internet for a point of contact.

Logistically speaking, many of these problems seem to fall into a set: “insufficient man hours available”. They also all seem to fit into a “complete lack of standards between Congress and advocacy groups” box as well. I think that co-operation and a set of rules or procedures between advocacy groups and Congressional offices is critical to resolving this problem, and I'd like to thank the Congressional Management Foundation for taking the lead in this arena. Later today, there'll be a panel and follow-up discussion of potential solutions to this problem, and I'm definitely looking forward to that.

What About Constituent Communications Isn't Working?

Mike Panetta
Assistant Vice President
Public Affairs and Emerging Media
Grassroots Enterprise

Good morning and thank you attending today's sessions.

My name is Mike Panetta and I am the Assistant Vice President for Public Affairs and Emerging Media at Grassroots Enterprise. Our company is a member of the coalition of vendors that is sponsoring today's event in an attempt to open a sustainable dialogue amongst all the various interests surrounding the issues at hand. Like our fellow vendor companies, we provide a turnkey solution for non-profit organizations, trade associations, corporations, and membership groups to send messages on issues important to their stakeholder to their elected officials. The act of speaking your mind to the people who represent you in government is a fundamental part of American democracy, and I know I speak for all of my industry colleagues and our respective clients when I say we look forward to working with all stakeholders on productive solutions to the issues we face on regarding constituent communications.

Today, I will be talking about what we, as providers of online advocacy solutions, feel is not working in terms of constituent communications with Congress. While I will be pointing out specific issues, I will try not to point fingers. Having spent time working on constituent correspondence myself, I understand the time and resource constraints that Congressional offices face. The aim of my presentation today is to identify issues so that we can have a frank and open discussion about what will need to change so that we can come to a workable solution for all parties involved.

Before I begin, I'd like to give a quick historical overview of how we see how Congress has handled electronic messages, and how our industry has worked with these changes. This background will provide context to how the current state of affairs came about.

In the early 1990's, when email began to become popular, several members of Congress had email addresses that were publicly available. Members would often check their own messages or have a staffer print off all their email, since as during this time the number of messages received was, for the most part, a manageable number. As the decade progressed, organized efforts to send emails to these public email addresses emerged, and web sites and directories where anyone could email every Members of Congress on an issue with one click began to proliferate. As the popularity of email increased, the need to organize and better manage the messages within Congressional offices grew.

Towards the end of the last decade, House and Senate offices began to roll back public-facing email addresses and replace them with web-based forms through which constituents could send messages to their members of Congress. These web forms, powered on the House of Representatives by the "Write Your Representative" system, forced constituency by requiring full address and zip code before a message could be delivered. For the most part, this has been a good approach, and a necessity given the volume of electronic messages over the past decade.

Our industry has attempted to work with these web forms and, to ensure that the messages we deliver on behalf of our clients' supporters to Congressional offices work with the existing data structures these forms require. However, recent changes to these web forms have been troubling for reasons I will explain shortly.

CURRENT PROBLEMS

There are a number of things that we feel are not working in regards to constituent communications to Capitol Hill, I will attempt to describe the ones that are specifically related to our industry.

Misperception of our Industry by Congressional Staff: We believe there is a level of distrust that comes from a basic misunderstanding of our business practices. There is a common misconception that we encourage our clients to “spam” Hill offices. A belief that our industry routinely engages in the practice of running large membership lists from our clients through our software programs to auto-generate email or faxed letters to Capitol Hill.

That’s simply not the case. Our clients may email their entire membership list and ask them to take action on a web page – but email messages to the Hill are generated individually as each person takes the action asked of them. We feel that it is critical that Congressional offices know that each email that comes to their inbox from one of our software services was the result of a real person, typically a constituent who responded to a call to action. This is an important distinction for Hill offices to better understand -- getting hundreds or thousands of emails on an issue generated by constituents affirmatively taking action is a much more accurate pulse of a district or state than anything auto-generated.

Technical Barriers: We understand and appreciate the need for Congressional offices to have some sort of mechanism to filter out non-constituent or auto-generated messages. As mentioned previously, all of our software platforms were designed to deliver constituent communications via the appropriate existing online constituent communications web form for each office. We collect the necessary data (name, address, zip code, etc.) on our sites, ensure a match for constituency, and then deliver it in the necessary format to work with the offices’ information system infrastructure or web form.

In most cases, this has worked fine for both parties. However, over the last 18 months we’ve seen a number of offices begin to implement technical barriers that are very difficult for third-party vendors to integrate into the data they collect. Some examples include so-called “logic puzzles” that force citizens to answer mundane or simple questions to prove they are not an automated response. Other offices have begun to use “CAPTCHA” tests to determine if a real person is submitting the form. CAPTCHA is an acronym for “Completely Automated Public Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart” and is an online authentication tool that requires the user to retype a code – usually a combination of letters and numbers – that appears on the screen.

Not only are these visual tests difficult to integrate with our systems, we’ve also heard complaints that a number of CAPTCHA tests are not ADA compliant, as they do not offer non-visual options for the visually impaired. I’m sure these Congressional offices did not set out to ensure only their seeing constituents could submit their opinions online, but that unfortunately has been an unforeseen consequence.

For the most part, we’ve all been able to work around these hurdles and get our client’s messages delivered one way or another – faxes, hand-delivered print-outs, etc., but it’s a resource drain for our industry and for Capitol Hill offices to continually engage in a cat and mouse game of technology one-upmanship.

As key conduits for your constituents to contact your offices, we work hard to ensure that only legitimate messages are sent from our software platforms and, as previously stated, we abhor the practice of sending computer-generated messages to Hill offices. Unfortunately, these logic puzzles and CAPTCHA tests are starting to generate a perception amongst the users of our

web sites that Members of Congress don't actually want to hear from their constituents. Of course, we know this is not true, but these roadblocks to contacting your offices do have consequences within the electorate.

Lack of universal standards: The aforementioned difficulties that arise from technical cat-and-mouse game is compounded by the fact there are no universal standards for delivering legitimate, constituent generated messages to Congress. Our delivery systems are designed to work with either the "Write Your Representative" application on the House side, or an individual Senate office. However each of these offices can make their own changes to how messages need to be delivered or what information is required before being accepted. As each office makes changes, our engineers need to update our software's configurations to ensure messages to that office remain deliverable. With 540 different offices all determining their own set of technical standards, that situation begins to become unwieldy rather quickly. Many web-based software systems publish open standards that other applications can use to better integrate their own offering. As an industry we'd welcome the opportunity to work on an open and public interface with Congress, we feel this would help both our clients and your offices establish a better relationship regarding constituent communications.

Technical Innovation: It's no secret that the volume of email being sent to the Hill has grown dramatically over the last several years. As an industry we find it amazing that a number of offices still respond to emails with paper letters sent via postal mail.

Of course there are offices that have made tremendous strides in streamlining how they handle incoming email, and we also recognize that staffing and technology resources have not kept pace with the increase in constituent communications. However, we suggest that Hill offices need to make a better attempt to adapt to today's communication standards.

Email has become a primary channel of communication for people to communicate with their elected officials. Congressional offices need to find ways to respond to incoming messages with outbound email messages. As long as electronic communications are funneled into the paper trail, staffers will never catch up with the volume of incoming messages.

Over Reliance on Members' Web Sites: In several of our meetings on this issue we've heard Congressional staffers state, "We wish constituents would come to our website and contact us through our web form." Unfortunately, this well-meaning wish goes against both current Internet trends and the goals of many of the advocacy organizations that drive the marketplace we serve.

On the web today people want to engage in the action asked of them within the context of where it was asked. Content rarely lives in just one place in today's "Web 2.0", through syndication via RSS feeds, blogs, and social networking applications, content and calls to action can appear in any number of places on the web. To expect a single point of entry into a database, such as a Congressional homepage, is going against the stream of today's best practices and limits participation.

Additionally, a strategic piece of information for our clients is the response rate to the actions asked of their members. If we were to drive activists to a member of Congress's web site to take action, our clients would have no idea how many messages were generated, who sent them, and to what offices. This is very valuable information for follow-up asks and gauging the success of an initiative, something that none of our clients will want to give up. Offices track their correspondences so we should all understand and appreciate that advocacy groups, associations and corporations want to track these communications too.

Our clients also want to be able to control the educational experience on a given issue before asking their activists to take action. Clients of our software also want to keep the entire activist experience within their web presence. This is also a convenience factor as it's more efficient for the activist to take action on a single page than forcing them to go to as many as three different web pages if they are contacting their two U.S. Senators and Representative.

Confusing User Experiences: We've seen an increase in auto-response messages to activists from Congressional office web forms that range from helpful, to cryptic, to almost dismissive in nature. In many cases, the auto-response email received by the activist, after sending their message via an advocacy organization's web site, flatly states that because the constituent did not use the Member's web site, the message will be ignored. These "brush-off" messages are obviously very frustrating to the constituent. In other cases, automatic responses are unclear if the message was received or if any further action is required. We'd like to see an automatic acknowledgement that the message was received as a standard practice in all Hill offices.

CONCLUSION

I hope my statement painted the picture of what issues we face as vendors to the advocacy community, and Congress faces trying to manage their constituent mail. I'd like to close by reminding the panel and the audience that we are hired by our clients to facilitate the education, communications, and engagement process for non-profits, corporations, trade associations, and professional organizations -- and deliver the resulting messages to the appropriate Congressional office. It is the members of these groups, your constituents, that are generating these messages -- not our companies.

Obviously, our messages need to be delivered before any of our client's grassroots objectives are achieved. We want to work towards a solution where the communications generated by our clients are both accepted and integrated into the constituent correspondence workflow of all offices -- but our clients need to be assured that their supporters' messages will be not be rejected simply because they were not entered into a Member of Congress' web site web form. In other words, we believe that constituent messages should not be judged or dismissed by how they were electronically delivered but rather by the content of the message itself -- assuming the message includes a real name and real constituent address within the district or state represented by your office.

As an industry we know that being effective rarely, if ever, means flooding a Congressional office with email messages from people outside their district. We'll continue to make sure messages sent to your offices are generated by real constituents that proactively take action. We hope we can work together to ensure they remain deliverable to your offices through the services we provide our clients.

Thank you once again for your time today.

Notes

Notes



Panel 3—The Solutions: Options for a New Model for Constituent Communications that Works for Everyone

Panelists

Larry Bradley—Gartner Consulting

Rob Pierson—Office of Congressman Mike Honda

Barkley Kern—Capitol Advantage

Daniel Bennett

Communicating with Congress Core Communications Challenges

- 1. The volume of communications to congressional offices has become unmanageable.** The volume of communications to Congress quadrupled between 1995 and 2004, and the volumes continue to increase. Many House and Senate offices are struggling to manage it. In many cases, offices have decided that finding means to reduce the volume, prioritize some communications over others, and/or filter out or ignore some communications is the only option. A successful communications solution will help offices manage the volume effectively and efficiently.
- 2. House and Senate offices have limited staff, money, and space.** There has been little change in congressional staff sizes since the 1970's, long before the Internet and e-mail changed the way citizens communicate with their elected representatives. Increasing congressional staff sizes is a political hurdle because it would require significant increases in legislative branch funding, and, if funding were provided, the Congress would have to confront the issue of where to put the staff in the already-overstuffed congressional office buildings. A successful communications solution will work within the current staffing, funding, and space constraints.
- 3. Congressional staff mistrust advocacy campaigns.** Congressional offices are suspicious of advocacy campaigns because they believe the messages are not "real;" that they are generated from organizations' membership lists without the knowledge and consent of the constituents whose names are on them. This mistrust leads many offices to assign advocacy campaigns lower priority than other messages or even to filter out or ignore these communications. A successful communications solution will help offices trust or authenticate citizen communications without placing such onus on citizens that it becomes an obstacle to democratic communication.
- 4. House and Senate offices are frustrated by incorrect, generic, and corrupt data.** Congressional offices report that they often receive data from advocacy campaigns which complicate their processing of, and response to, the communications. Sometimes data is inaccurate (e.g. typos, incorrect addresses, and zip codes that do not correspond to addresses). Other times, generic data is included in every message (e.g. the same zip code or salutation on every message). And sometimes electronic data is impossible to import into office databases because data is corrupt or because the fields in the messages do not correspond to the fields in the office's database. A successful communications solution will help ensure that data is as correct, complete, correctly formatted, and incorrupt as possible and that electronic data works with offices' existing databases.
- 5. Congressional offices do not employ electronic data standards for citizen communications.** At present, electronic communications to most congressional offices must be sent via the forms on their Web sites. With the exception of House offices that use the Write Your Representative form, each office creates and maintains its own Web form. As a result, public affairs organizations that wish to organize and generate electronic advocacy campaigns must be able to format their messages correctly for every office they are targeting. They must also be sure to include the information each office seeks. For example, some offices require zip-plus-four, others require titles, phone numbers, or a response to a CAPTCHA puzzle. Collecting and formatting information for every office can be difficult and time-consuming, and often leads to the incorrect, generic, and corrupt data that frustrates congressional offices. A successful communications solution will use standards that are predictable for the public affairs community, but flexible enough to meet congressional offices' needs.
- 6. Personalized messages and form messages are viewed differently.** Identical form messages are largely viewed as petitions. The public affairs community uses them to engage their members, generate volume and demonstrate strength in numbers. Congressional offices

usually view them as indicators, and some view them as opportunities to collect data (e.g. interests, affiliations, and e-mail addresses), but few base decisions on form campaigns. Customized messages, on the other hand, are viewed as more authoritative, since constituents take more time and effort in crafting them, but they are more difficult for the public affairs community to generate. Many congressional offices prioritize personalized messages over form messages, and they sometimes, even in small numbers, can influence Members' decisions. However, form messages are easier for congressional offices to process, and enable faster replies. A successful communications solution will facilitate both types of communication, help differentiate between the two, and provide congressional offices with flexibility in accessing, analyzing, and responding to form campaigns.

- 7. Congressional offices dislike fax campaigns, but many in the public affairs community view them as the most assured way to deliver a timely message.** In order to have the greatest impact on a particular vote, the public affairs community often conducts advocacy campaign in the days and weeks leading up to it. However, because of the post-anthrax challenges of paper mail and the many hurdles to e-mail, many in the public affairs community have decided that fax is the best way to deliver messages that must get through in a timely fashion. However, congressional staff report a disdain for faxes because they require data entry by hand and are, as a result, a significant drain on already strained congressional resources. A successful communications solution will take into account the need to deliver timely messages that are not a drain on congressional resources.
- 8. Many Members of Congress do not respond to e-mail via e-mail.** Although responding to e-mail with e-mail would save offices' time and money and enable them to respond to constituents more quickly, many refuse to do so. The most frequently-cited reason is that Members and/or senior managers fear their communications would be altered and forwarded to constituents or the press, resulting in political problems. A successful communications solution will alleviate offices' concerns about the security of e-mail messages and facilitate responding to e-mail via e-mail.
- 9. Not all citizens desire a response to their communications to Congress.** Congressional offices feel a great deal of pressure to respond to their constituents' communications, which is why most prioritize some communications over others. The communications that required the most effort are usually prioritized above those that require little effort. However, not all constituents wish to receive responses from their Members of Congress, but merely wish to register their opinions. A successful communications solution will help congressional offices differentiate between constituents who do and do not require responses.
- 10. Citizens desire to communicate with committees and leadership offices.** Although our form of government does not necessitate it, citizens desire to communicate their views to congressional leaders and committee members that do not necessarily represent them. Congressional offices regularly receive messages from non-constituents, but these messages usually are forwarded to the appropriate Member or ignored. The successful communications solution might include the means for citizens to register their views with relevant committee and leadership offices without creating an added burden to personal, committee, or leadership offices or requiring offices to view or respond to messages that are not from constituents.

Communicating with Congress

Larry E. Bradley, Jr.
Associate Director
Gartner Consulting

Background

In August 2004, the Committee on House Administration (CHA) and the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) initiated a project to develop a vision and plan for the future use of technology in the House of Representatives. To support this project, CHA initiated a partnership between Gartner and CMF. Gartner is an internationally-respected technology research and consulting firm with extensive experience assessing and developing technology strategies for federal, state and local governments and *Fortune 500* corporations. CMF is a non-profit organization that provides management services to Congress and, through its work, has developed extensive knowledge of House operations and technology use in the House and in other legislatures. Throughout this project, Gartner and CMF have been working closely with the majority and minority staff from CHA and the CAO and his staff.

This project provided the Gartner and CMF team multiple opportunities to explore how legislative and constituent management business is conducted in the Congress, and how communications and information technology support these business processes. These project activities provide the basis of my panel testimony. In the paragraphs below are brief descriptions of the project steps and the expanse of data collection and analysis that occurred in the project.

The first phase of this project was to conduct extensive research with House stakeholders and technology experts. We conducted detailed interviews with 128 individuals with expertise on the House, which included interviews with Members; officers and officials; senior managers from leadership offices, committees, and Member offices; professional and administrative staff throughout the House; select legislative branch technology specialists; and individuals outside the legislative branch with expertise on House operations and technology. The focus of these interviews was on the opportunities and challenges Members, staff, and the institution currently face and expect to face in the foreseeable future, and on how technology is being used in the House and the impact it is having on Members, staff, and the institution.

Using the results of the current state research, the project team identified possible visions to guide House technology adoption over the next ten years and developed a process to vet these visions with different groups of House stakeholders and agree on a common vision for technology in the House in the future.

Between January and July of 2005, Gartner and CMF facilitated six roundtable discussions with high-level House stakeholders. The discussions involved Members from committees responsible for management and oversight of the House, leadership Staff Directors, House officers and legislative branch officials, committee Staff Directors, Member office Chiefs of Staff, and high-level House and legislative branch technology administrators. In a series of meetings, these groups addressed a range of issues related to House culture, policy, process, and technology adoption. A major achievement of the project included a CHA Hearing where Members were invited to hear testimony on the House technology vision, ask questions and comment on the viability of the vision.

Once the data gathering steps of the project completed, the Gartner and CMF teams began analyzing the data and identifying gaps or challenges to communicating with, adopting technology and instituting change in the House. The team developed reports on these challenges that were widely reviewed and commented on by House stakeholders. Finally, the team developed a strategic roadmap for achieving the House's vision for technology that again was widely commented on and accepted by House stakeholders.

Key Findings

During the House IT Assessment and Strategy project, the challenges in managing constituent and other external communications emerged as a major topic. From the Congress' point of view, the challenge in communicating falls under the major business process of constituent management.

One of the primary findings of the current state assessment is that from the perspective of Representatives, Senators and their staffs, the most valuable communications from outside the Congress are personal communications from individual constituents. When a citizen or other constituent takes the time to make the individual effort to communicate a need or opinion on an issue, the view is that this represents a future behavior and a truly actionable belief. Office staff go to great lengths to answer phone calls, respond to individually created paper and electronic mail based on this perspective. Great amounts of Congressional resources are dedicated to this important function of communicating with individual constituents.

A correlation to this is that Congressional staff also spend a great deal of time sifting through and filtering out mass produced communications due to the belief that mass mailings and faxes from special interest groups do not reflect truly actionable behaviors. Form letters, e-mails and faxes are routinely filtered out and ignored either because the staff does not trust the source or because the ease of creating these communications leaves doubt to whether the communication actually represents a belief on which the constituent will act or vote. For example, almost all constituents will state a belief that education or ending poverty is an important goal for the country, but these beliefs do not actually result in voting actions or behaviors in the face of other issues. Therefore, it is believed that when a mass e-mail or other communication is created for a constituent it represents a belief that is unlikely to be backed up by behavior. On the other hand, when a constituent feels strongly enough to develop their own ideas and communicate them directly and personally to the Representative or Senator, staff perceive this as strong evidence that the constituent will back the communication up with action.

Another related theme regarding communicating with Congress is that Senators and Representatives and their staff primarily focus on and are influenced by their own constituents. The limited time and other resources available to Congressional staff limit any interest in what citizens outside their constituency think. Congressional staff view themselves as representing their own constituency and focus on providing services and representation to these groups alone. Therefore, Congress identified a primary requirement of communications to be the ability to accurately identify a communication as originating with a constituent as is evidenced that most e-mail communication must go through web forms requiring the sender to identify all or part of an address or phone number within the receiver's constituency.

Analysis

As the project team analyzed the data and looked at the current technology capabilities and trends available to Congress, several findings emerged.

First, the project team did not identify a true value derived from mass communications on the part of Congress. The manual and electronic resources consumed to process the volumes of data grossly outweigh the small amount of analytical or trend data that offices are able to glean from mass communications. Most offices already decide which advocacy campaigns they will believe and which ones they will discount. Therefore, the project team recommends that Congress continue to limit and filter out mass communications in favor of focusing on more personal communications.

The implication for the public affairs or advocacy community is that rather than trying to be the communications channel through which constituents communicate, the focus of effort should be on organizing, informing and influencing the behaviors of Congressional constituents. By focusing on generating awareness and influencing behavior through informing constituents about issues, the major events or votes that are taking place regarding issues and then the

most effective ways to personally communicate will have a more profound impact on influencing Congress than mass communications. Creating organized voting blocks willing to produce actionable behaviors such as personal communications to Congress would be the recommendation of the House IT Assessment and Strategy project team. Of course, we recognize some of the challenges and negative effects of this recommendation. It is easy to capture and demonstrate a perceived level of effectiveness by reporting on the number of form e-mails, letters and faxes generated by an advocacy campaign. Capturing this level of information would be more difficult in the recommended scenario where the advocacy campaign is not acting as the communications channel. This makes generating support and demonstrating the effectiveness of the advocacy campaign more difficult.

The project team did investigate using a formalized data structure, sometimes known as schema or taxonomy, to improve the effectiveness of mass communications. While this might incrementally improve the value of mass communications, defining and implementing this data structure would be very time consuming and expensive and in the opinion of the project team would outweigh the benefits. Therefore, until an appropriate data structure emerges from other sources either within or outside of Congress, this is not considered a viable option. Even then, a major component of this structured mass communication strategy would have to be a way to identify communications with a high level of assurance as originating from the Member of Congress' constituency. This would elevate the trust that Members and their staff would place in the validity of the data.

This need for accurate and trust worthy means of electronically verifying a constituent's identity would enable improved electronic communications with Congress. Newer Members increasingly display more comfort with communicating electronically, but still show concerns with how to ensure that electronic communications are secure, valid and effective. Overcoming this hurdle requires more resources than individual offices and even Congress as a whole can provide alone. Initiatives to provide publicly available and shareable credentials are gaining momentum. An example of an emerging solution is the Office of Management and Budget's E-Authentication Initiative managed by the General Services Administration. This program will enable citizens to use existing electronic credentials from their bank, academic institution, company or other organization to identify themselves electronically. A readily available and simple way to identify and be assured that a communication originates from a constituent will enable Members of Congress to rely on electronic communications to a greater degree. While this may help mass e-mail communications marginally, more importantly it could potentially open up the ability to facilitate more sophisticated electronic communications such as electronic town halls, electronic discussions or polling, and customized, electronically automated services.

The narrowing of constituencies would also improve the ability to conduct online town halls or discussions. A reported problem from the IT Assessment and Strategy project that the YouTube debates confirm is that anonymous communications often have little value and encourage outrageous behavior. Having verifiable identities that are tied to valid online profiles with the Member would increase the value and minimize the chaos that diminishes effectiveness of these tools.

The use of more automated electronic processes currently suffers from some of the legacy systems that the Congress has used over time. These systems were built using technology available at the time, but newer trends enabling more sophisticated ways of supporting the Congress' business processes. One trend, known as service-oriented architecture, enables the ability to build or buy small applications that can be assembled into larger services to enable entire business processes. Individual components can then be shared or replaced as needed. The primary benefit this provides in communicating with Congress is the ability to continue to support Congressional office autonomy while providing sharable services that an individual office would not be able to afford or manage. This will enable Congress to provide electronic services that constituents can use independently in addition to the more traditional services offices already provide. As many consumer oriented companies have learned, automated or

self-service processes do not replace traditional processes, but augment them. Providing automated services that resemble those provided by on-line banking, insurance and retail can increase the visibility and level of service that Members provide constituents, provide a more accessible Congress that can interact with the constituent more frequently and provide a higher level of customized service for the individual constituent. To provide this capability would be too expensive and complex for individual offices and traditionally required large, centralized systems that would be difficult to adopt in the Congressional environment. The ability to “break up” these capabilities into components that can be shared and customized provides Congress the ability to enhance the ability to use electronic means to interact personally with constituents.

One of the trends that the project team’s research identified in international legislatures indicates a move to a more constituent focused relationship rather than Member focused. In other words, the constituent interacts with the legislature as a whole, but has special channels of communication with their particular Member or Members. This does not imply that all information about the constituent is owned by the legislature, but leveraging the modular approach some information is owned and controlled by the Member, some is shared by the Member and the legislature and some is maintained by the legislature while being controlled by the constituent. For example, individual communications would be stored in the Member’s database, but the constituent might create an online identity that can be shared by their Representative and Senators to allow the constituent to customize their interactions with all or one of their Members of Congress.

As an example, a future relationship between a constituent and Member of Congress could look like the following:

- A constituent goes to their Representatives web page and is asked if they would like to register and create a profile with the Member.
- The constituent would be asked to verify their identity.
 - If the constituent provides a manually entered address, they may get limited access to or notification of more sophisticated communications channels such as online town halls or individual web casts by the Representative, but
 - If the constituent uses a credential with a high degree of assurance they would get a richer set of communications tools such as the ability to order their own flag or White House tour tickets online, invitations to online video conferences where they can submit questions online or even submit case requests for help with individual issues such as Social Security, Veterans or MediCare/MedicAid benefits
- The constituent could then be asked if they would like their profile to be shared with their Senators
 - If yes, basic demographic data and communications preference such as a preference for phone calls over e-mail would be shared with the Senators and the constituent would only login once to initiate communications with all of their respective Members
 - If no, the constituent would be able to create individual profiles with each if they chose to do so
- Once the profile has been established the constituent could elect to have all communications returned via e-mail unless otherwise indicated, sign-up for e-mail updates and attend an online town hall
- As the constituent interacts with the Members and their staff electronically, a traceable reputation or relationship can be developed between the Member and the constituent which may result in increased electronic privileges such as being invited to more personal web conferences

- Additionally, the Representative's portal for the constituent could have options that allow self service options such as checking on the status of case management requests or seeing where a flag order is in process, and then having the ability to submit an inquiry using instant messaging, e-mail or even getting the name and phone number of the individual handling their issue so they can place a call (which could even be done automatically if constituent has internet calling capabilities (Voice over IP).
 - These capabilities would all be provided in the context of the Representative's office, but in reality would be services shared across and available to all Members of Congress. This enables a balance between personal service and the sharing of resources.
- To protect and ensure integrity of communications, only e-mail notifications would be sent to constituents. In other words, a constituent could be notified that a message tailored for them or posted on a specific topic is available by e-mail. The constituent would click on a link that takes them to a web page where the message can be read through an online reader that prevents alteration to the message

Conclusion

The evidence gathered within the House IT Assessment and Strategy project suggests that the most effective means of communicating with Congress is through personal communications between constituents and Members of Congress and their staff. Mass communications provide relatively little value to Members and their staff while tying up valuable electronic and human resources. Congress will and should continue to focus on primarily supporting individual communications which more directly reflect constituent behaviors rather than opinions. Emerging technology initiatives and trends will provide Congress and constituents the ability to extend relationships through electronic means. Congressional offices will have the ability to offer more services and more customized communications to constituents who in turn will receive the ability to have more control and influence over how they interact with Congress. This improvement in communications capability will result in improved perceptions by constituents in the interactions with Congress, and Congressional staff acquiring the ability to provide more effective messaging and a better understanding of constituent's actionable beliefs.

Communicating with Congress: A Structured Solution

Rob Pierson

Director of Online Communications, Office of Congressman Mike Honda
President, House Systems Administrators Association

The benefits of the internet have reached into nearly every sector of our society. Business productivity has risen dramatically, and individuals have been empowered in ways that few had imagined. These new capacities hold great promise for civic participation in our democracy. Geographically disparate groups can rapidly coalesce around niche issues, and using low cost technologies, grass roots organizations can make a substantial impact on federal legislation.

Increased communications capacities that made possible by the internet have simultaneously placed tremendous burdens on Congressional offices. A solution must be found to encourage civic participation without overburdening Congressional offices.

Just as the development of well-developed standards is frequently mentioned as a key to the successful growth of the internet, I believe that the adoption of a standardized format for constituent correspondence promises significant benefits for Congressional offices, advocacy organizations, mail campaign vendors, and, most importantly, for the American public.

The Problem: Email is becoming unmanageable

As earlier speakers have noted, the state of constituent correspondence remains highly problematic. The flood of advocacy emails is deluging Congressional offices, and we are struggling to keep up. We constantly live with the concern that overwhelming mailing campaigns could make us miss critical emails, such as a request for help from someone serving on the front lines in Iraq.

Because a standardized data format does not exist for constituent correspondence, advocacy campaign form letters go into the same inbox as comments initiated by individuals. Offices use increasingly advanced technology to manage this correspondence, but Congressional offices report intense frustration and a growing tendency to regard advocacy campaigns as spam. Congressional offices highly value the input of constituents, but offices report feeling overwhelmed by the current system of constituent correspondence.

Mail levels expected to grow

One of the key metrics of success for many advocacy campaigns is the quantity of emails sent to congressional offices (which also coincidentally correlates with the degree people feel a part of an organization and subsequently donate to the organization). As such, we can expect the quantity of correspondence to continue the trend of exponential increase.

Many of my colleagues have expressed great concerns over the state of constituent mail, with some offices going so far as to enact systems to block all automated correspondence that originates from advocacy organizations campaigns. These systems, like the logic puzzle, were overcome by the large advocacy system vendors within days. Instead of engaging in continuously escalating warfare, I am pleased that the stakeholders are here today looking for a mutually beneficial solution.

The solution: Structured Data Formats

Stakeholders should jointly develop a structured data format for corresponding with congress. While there would be increased technical demands placed upon advocacy organizations, I

believe that the benefits for all parties would greatly outweigh the costs of adoption of a standardized system. Most congressional offices are already using constituent correspondence systems which utilize XML, so incorporating additional fields would be a manageable addition.

Contact Information

The correspondence could include fields for the name and contact information for the advocacy organization and mass mail vendor, allowing offices to communicate with those offices if there are technical or content errors in the emails being sent to Congress. In addition, offices could then more easily tabulate the number of constituents who are members of that group.

Individual comments field

At the moment, all email correspondence typically goes a single mail depository system and then staff must run algorithms to find nearly identical emails, which we then interpret as identical correspondence. We don't have the time to find the individual comments within each email, so the customized individual comments that constituents enter are typically not noticed.

A section for individual comments in the email would allow these highly desirable individual comments on legislation to reach offices. This would also allow offices to quickly peruse constituent's comments on a specific bill or issue which they are evaluating.

Brevity should be strongly encouraged. Staff time is highly limited and lengthier comments will reduce the degree to which comments are read. Constituents should be encourage to conduct more extensive conversations on the phone.

Legislation

Indicating the legislation being commented upon (if any) would have several benefits, including allowing staff to quickly look up constituent's individualized comments on a bill and allow for advanced reporting functionality.

General Issue

Issue tagging (i.e. health or foreign relations) would also be useful for reporting and automatically routing letters to staffers who handle a particular issue. This could also allow for customized mail reports based on the issues that staffers handle.

This is complicated by the fact that different offices use different issue categorizing schemes, and different aspects of an issues may be handled by different staffers. The Congressional Research Service's Legislative Indexing Vocabulary (LIV) may be the most effective (and standardized) taxonomy for this purpose. A system could be developed in which offices had the ability to map out which LIV term corresponded to their own particular system and which staffer(s) handled each.

Short Title

A brief label for the campaign which could be listed in reports.

Support / Oppose

When relevant, organizations could indicate whether their campaign is in support of, or opposing the bill or issue. Today, because of time constraints, offices will draft a single email to those who support and oppose a bill. As such, there is sometimes no tracking of the sentiment of a controversial issue other than the total quantity of constituents who wrote in both in favor and against the issue.

Additional data

Constituent contact info

Congressional offices would appreciate gaining as much information about constituents as possible. Advocacy groups (and constituently) are likely more hesitant about providing that information to congressional offices. It remains a question whether constituents should be required to include their address, phone number, and email address in their correspondence.

Enewsletter signup

Congressional offices are constantly looking for ways to more effectively reach their constituency. We would greatly appreciate if advocacy organizations allowed constituents to sign up for our Enewsletters through their contact your member form.

Other Potential Features

Ensuring Writer is a Constituent

Being able to ensure that only constituents were communicating with a member is a requirement frequently cited by Congressional offices.

Communicating with Committees

On the other hand, constituents have requested the ability to be able to communicate with other members who stand on committees that will be addressing issues that are important to them and that their representative may have less impact on.

Benefits for Stakeholders

Advocacy Organizations

Accurate Tabulation: Offices, in greater numbers, are beginning to respond to some advocacy mail campaigns with simple "Thank you for contacting my office" form letters. Since offices typically tally the number of constituents advocating a position by counting how many times each form letter was sent out per week, the sentiments expressed through mass mail campaigns are increasingly undercounted. The more precise tabulation which could be developed with a structured data format would allow for the voice of advocacy groups to be heard more clearly.

Increasing Influence and Dialogue: Offices would see how much sway organizations had by their number of members contacting the office from their District. They could also easily contact organizations if they had additional questions about the advocacy group's position on the issue or preemptively reach out to the organization before an upcoming key vote.

Constituents

Better Representation: Constituents would be empowered by their Representative being better able to view their comments on specific legislation and issues. High priority messages could also receive quicker attention. Offices may, however, want to steer time sensitive communications to telephone communications.

Congressional Offices

The greatest benefits of this system go to congressional offices. Large amounts of staff resources could be conserved and used for more constituent responses and other legislative

duties. In addition, being able to easily view constituent comments on a particular bill (and view charts of district sentiment) would be incredibly valuable to offices.

Mass mail vendors

Certification: To increase participation in this program (and address potential spamming issues) there perhaps a certification process should be developed. Vendors who received certification in this program could advertise that they are certified. This is a complex issue which requires substantial thought before potential implementation.

Reception Assurance: Certified vendors could receive a guarantee that their email is being received by congressional offices. Offices might not actually view the advocacy campaign correspondence, but it would be available to congressional offices in an easily accessible system while unstructured mass mail campaigns might not make it to offices.

Avoiding Spam Designation: Once this system was in use offices would increasingly view large mass mail campaigns using unstructured data as spam and increasingly ignore them. As momentum developed, all large organizations would begin using structure data formats. We would need to develop a way to easily allow smaller advocacy groups to also utilize the enhanced correspondence format.

Additional issues

Smaller Organization Participation: Sending the correspondence in a structured data format could be cost-prohibitive for smaller organizations. These smaller organizations, which might typically send out a mass email and simply suggest that their members email their member of Congress. Solutions should be found to allow smaller advocacy organizations the option of participating in this system even if they don't have the funds to pay for advocacy campaign software.

Final Comments

Government is typically slow to adapt to change, and even more so for Congress. The ideas contained in this document are mere seeds for further discussion. Implementing substantial changes to the status quo, however, will require determination and sustained collaboration between all parties. While difficult, improvements are critical to constituents being able to communicate effectively with their representatives. Our job, while daunting, is a needed step in the evolution of our democratic system.

The leadership shown by CMF, and the coalition they have fostered, leads me to believe that our goals are achievable. Our next step, I believe, is to continue the dialogue started here to develop a system which serves the needs of all stakeholders, and most importantly, the American people.

Options for a New Model for Constituent Communications that Works for Everyone

Barkley Kern
Executive Vice President
Capitol Advantage

Hello, I'm Barkley Kern and while I am the Executive Vice President of Capitol Advantage, today I represent the member companies of the Communicating with Congress Working Group who have been kind enough to select me to serve as their spokesman for the Solutions panel.

Today's sessions have been very informative and I think the panelists have done a fine job outlining the technology and challenges that have lead to the need for this conference, and the need to create a better system. I think it has been clearly stated and agreed to that meeting the challenges created through online advocacy will be mutually beneficial. Congress needs a more efficient system to benefit from the opinions of and meet the needs of their constituents, while citizens and organizations need to communicate in a way that facilitates better dialogue.

Our hope is that we can move toward what one of my colleagues has termed the great compromise. The great compromise centers on each party achieving its primary objective. It's a win/win scenario that results in a more effective and efficient system of communicating electronically with Congress - a system that serves the needs of citizens, associations and Congress alike. The primary objectives are:

On one side, vendors and their customers want to ensure users of their systems that their messages are being heard by Congress. Anyone who takes the time to compose or send a message wants to know that their opinion matters – to know that they have been acknowledged and that their voice has been included in the debate. A simple auto reply may suffice.

On the other side, Congress wants to be certain that messages are from a real constituent so their time is spent serving the needs of the people they represent. Congress also wants to receive messages in a manner they can manage with the information they need. That way a congressional office can reap the benefits of understanding the feelings of a broad spectrum of their constituents.

Achieving the great compromise will take work on both sides, but the eventual winner will be the constituents and maybe even democracy.

Now, getting to that compromise requires an actual solution that meets the challenges we've discussed today, and we hope that will begin to take shape in the coming months. So in order to begin moving down a path that ends with the solution I think we should agree to three principles.

First, to recognize the value, importance and opportunities presented with electronic mail.

In a democracy, the opinions of millions of people matter. Millions of real people use the Working Group's technology to send their thoughts to Congress and other elected officials every year, and that number is growing. Developing a system that ensures these voices are heard will encourage participation. It is unrealistic to expect Congressional offices to manage the increasing volume of important constituent communications without the adequate budget to apply the necessary resources, so part of the solution is to recognize the need for more resources and to build a system that best utilizes the resources at hand.

We have to recognize that any system that shuts out legitimate voices just isn't keeping with American ideals and, indeed, the First Amendment. If either the vendors or Congress runs a system that doesn't work for constituents we all lose.

The second principle is to cooperate and act in good faith.

We are here before you today like a new postal service. We send significantly more messages to Congressional offices than the real postal service, and that transformation has happened quickly within the past decade. Now, unlike the US Postal Service, we're not attached to the government, but we are charged by citizens with an important task, and one we take seriously. We know Congress does as well.

And even though e-mail has become a daily part of all of our lives as it has exploded over the past fifteen years we still are in something like Pony Express mode. There is still something of a Wild West feel to the Internet and in any rapidly evolving and creative environment some mistakes will be made. Our industry has made its share by sending incomplete data or non-constituent email. And some in Congress have erected barriers to block messages and are losing out on perhaps millions of legitimate messages in the process.

We all have to realize that we are still dealing with an emerging or at least rapidly evolving world of technology. The start up phase of sending emails to Congress is over though so now is the time for the Vendors and Congress to work together to establish the standards that will usher in a more mature and productive market. Let's tame the Wild West.

The third principle is to agree to work together to create a more efficient and mutually beneficial system that serves constituents.

The simple fact that we are all here today learning about the current state of affairs and exploring solutions shows that we are moving in the right direction. The Working Group would like to propose a next step to preserve our collective momentum.

The first would be to form a task force to develop a standard API for sending electronic messages to the Hill. This would include the necessary data fields that Hill offices require to accept and manage messages.

The second is to develop access controls for the API. Any organization or vendor that requests access to the API would need to commit to acceptable business practices. This is generally referred to as a reputation based access system.

Taking these two steps would move us toward the great compromise and ideally to a system that opens doors to new possibilities. Again, we are still in the early stages and the steps we take now will help shape the way citizens communicate with Congress for years to come. As Mike pointed out, the current state of affairs is generating more and more required work on both sides. Working together cooperatively should lead to a system that makes managing constituent mail easier not harder, and better serves our customers and their members as well.

We've seen progress by working cooperatively with Congress and we and all the vendors in the Working Group are ready to listen and learn how they can be part of the solution.

This June, I represented the Working Group at meetings with staff from the House and Senate and during that meeting I showed a collage of photographs of the real people who have sent e-mails to Congress. You see it here on the screen. Since then millions more have joined their ranks and the number grows every day. These folks are who we're working for. They care

about America and we have a unique opportunity to make a difference for them. We are ready to take up the challenge.

I know I speak for everyone on the Communicating with Congress Working Group in saying we're ready to work, and ready to listen.

Thank you for your time today.

Communicating with Congress by Way of Advocacy Groups: Using the Topic Code

Daniel Bennett

*(part of the ongoing project, [Advocating for a Healthy Online Political Ecology](http://www.advocatehope.org/)
<http://www.advocatehope.org/>)*

Background

It is vital for technology experts to work closely with political wonks and legislative experts to develop the tools and applications for a healthy online political ecology. In the case of sending messages to Congress by way of advocacy groups this has been a very long road with plenty of bumps and scrapes along the way. This paper sets out to explain a major step in the evolution of citizen to Congress communication. To develop a solution to the current situation an effort had to be made to meld the interests of everyone with technology. And bringing together political folks with technical folks often results in both sides speaking past each other.

However, there are some interesting parallels between the goals of both the political and technical folks. Both sides have similar abstract principles. For both those principles should include the need to keep barriers to entry as low as possible, to use a common words and avoid jargon, be as open as possible, abide by standards that are reached by consensus, avoid complex solutions when simple ones will suffice, make sure that any records can be preserved for historical and analytical purposes, allow as much communication as possible, and not let noise crowd out worthwhile interaction. It is not an accident that these principles apply equally well to healthy and successful political discourse and powerful online technology: both a body politic and the Internet can be defined as being a network. And it is crucial that these principles be raised at the beginning any discussion of any new political technology.

It may be difficult for non-technically inclined people to understand the underlying technology that powers the web. And tech staff often has an understandably difficult time explaining the various and brand new technologies. However, people who oversee legislative or political organization and ignore technology and relegate it to their technological staff to make crucial decisions will often waste resources and opportunities. In the early days of the Internet when the general audience was skewed and the tools untested, the harm done was minimal. Now the Internet has reached much of the promises of the early days, near universal access, a key communications vehicle, and a considerable workforce multiplier, administrative linchpin (what organization does not depend on email, Blackberry alerts, etc?). All of this is easier stated than done, but there can be some straightforward considerations that can be addressed to attain the goals of successful organizations that function within a healthy online political ecology.

The Problem

I will use the example of citizen to congressional communication where organizations direct citizen supporters to electronically petition members of Congress. Since 1993 when public email was made available for congressional offices to receive messages, citizens have opted in greater numbers to use the Internet as the means to send messages to Congress. Quickly, advocacy organizations saw this communications vehicle as advantageous for many reasons. However, it added a layer to the communications route from citizen to Congress. Where the layer added lay is the most difficult aspect of the problem, because a solution had been worked out for receiving messages from each member's of Congress official web site.

Compounding the issue was the issue of volume. Where in the past, if messages came in with unintentionally or intentionally bad data (e.g. incorrect address), the staffer could either correct the incorrect information or physically sort out the bad letters. Now the messages come into one

long list that can entail scrolling for hours. And since the overall volume of correspondence has increased, the ability to physically sort incoming messages (e.g. moving the rack of telegrams to a shelf for another week), the level of staffing has not increased to accommodate the additional load. Also, much the staffers are unaware of the many tools at their disposal to sort, correct, and delete bad messages. And the outside groups are constantly working to further increase the overall messaging into this system.

Under paid and overworked staff have taken to setting up roadblocks to outside messages generally including not having or an email address for constituents to send messages. Additionally, taking advantage of the extra layer added by many outside groups (which could just route people to the actual web form with a web link), several offices have added CAPTCHA, "Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart" barriers to their web forms (mainly in the form of a logic puzzle). Members of Congress unable to individually to better their offices situation and not knowledgeable about the underlying technology approve of such measures. The increase in the barriers to electronically communicate with congressional offices has frustrated the attempts for outside groups to pass messages from citizens on to congressional offices.

The problem created by the listed conditions is that the ability of citizens and elected officials to communicate has been seriously compromised. Representational democracy in a republic relies on the free flow of ideas and concerns between citizens and elected representatives. Understanding that this is the actual problem as opposed to the various causes and symptoms of the situation is paramount. The breakdown of communication can lead to Members of Congress being unable to take the pulse of their most vocal constituencies, to a large segment of citizens to become disengaged or disenchanting with the quality of their representation.

Fortunately, fixing the problem involved a couple of simple solutions and an understanding of the current electronic messaging infrastructure and various issues that have arisen.

The Current Electronic Messaging Infrastructure

For about twenty years a computerized system for handling correspondence to Congress has developed into a fairly efficient application called a Correspondence Management System (CMS). Essentially, messages would arrive at a congressional office. Staffers would read the messages, data entry the name and postal address as well as a name or computer file name for the response to be drafted for each message. Quite often if there had been other correspondence on the same issue received it was likely that there already existed a name for the response letter which may already or not been written. Then each office had their own system for drafting, approving and then printing the responses.

In the pre-Internet age advocacy organizations brought their supporters voices to Congress, using included postcards, Western Union "telegrams," and other easy to identify campaigns diminished in proportion (if not in actual numbers). Whereas, some offices would take postcard trays and stack them for months and others might dismiss them altogether, generally they were viewed as a hassle to deal with by staff. Quite often the cards or letters seemed to be an adjunct to fundraising direct mail pieces and the messages were often not timely or relevant to pending legislation. Many congressional staff weakened the effect of the messages by not including them in a timely manner to the mail reports that many Members of Congress if at all as well as describing them as less important when reported.

When the House of Representatives and Senate first started allowing individual offices to have public email addresses for constituent communications, the existing CMS applications did not have a means for dealing with email differently than all other forms of messages. Most offices just printed the email messages and added them to the stack of other letters, faxes, postcards

and telegrams in order to keep the system that their office had developed using the CMS application. The responses would be then printed and mailed to the postal address given on the correspondence. Some offices tried to email responses by using the email software to directly respond despite the extra work entailed by being unable to use their CMS application to accurately track and send responses as well as create accurate mail reports.

To solve this disconnect the company Intelligent Solutions (now absorbed as a division Lockheed Martin) worked with Congresswoman Eshoo's office to expand the ability of the CMS used in that office. The first step was to analyze the problem of receiving the message directly into the CMS application (at that time known as Quorum 10). Email messages were essentially unformed electronic data for all but the email address and subject matter (except where the received email address and subject were contradicted by the unformed message, in which case the whole message would be considered unformed).

Intelligent Solutions and Eshoo's office decided to use web forms as an electronic way to allow messages to be formed in such a way to be automatically added to the CMS. The response would be posted similar to a web mail system does today with a password created for the initial correspondence and used for any following correspondence as well. The web form automatically sent an email with a formatted XML body (within the text of the email message, not as an attachment). Other offices adopted this system called CitizenDirect.

The CitizenDirect web system was developed as an additional method of communication electronically, not in order to supersede or replace email. However, many offices that used CitizenDirect decided to turn off their office's public email to allow for the much easier to deal with CitizenDirect messages. At about the same time web sites for members of Congress not using CitizenDirect, became popular. Those offices used the web form developed by the House Information Resources staff or their own as a means to receive messages that although unformed would at least include all the required information. Many of these offices, inundated with email messages that were not from constituents and often unrelated to any aspect of the official business of their offices, turned off their email addresses.

Soon after developing CitizenDirect, Intelligent solutions created a sophisticated method add-on to their CMS called the Internet Mail Agent for accepting unformed emails, in addition to the XML formatted ones, directly into their CMS application and also allowed for responding with email instead of the password protected message posted to the web. The same XML formatting was retained for the messages and eventually was adopted officially by the House of Representatives for all CMS vendors as well as the official Write Your Rep web form system.

The XML format (*see example 1*) allowed for the name, email address, postal address, whether a response was requested, as well as a text message. The IMA system allowed for some other data as well which was not included in the official format adopted. However, it was generally impossible for outside organizations to use the system directly.

Many advocacy groups decided to use commercial solutions that could track each of the 540 plus House and Senate offices accepting constituent messages electronically. Generally the system would write through the web forms on the congressional web sites. In other words, a constituent would fill out a web form on the web site of an advocacy web site, and that data would be used by the commercial solutions to automatically fill in the web forms on the congressional sites.

The XML layer that allowed easy data communication was very simple, but unavailable. In addition, outside organizations greatly increased the amount of messages through the system, making the solution of a one track solution to processing and tracking correspondence actually harder. Although there was always bad information, the multiple layer system fostered an

increase of potential mistakes and problems. Many offices complained about bad actors (those outside groups that due to the low cost of sending messages would feel free to bombard congressional offices with intentionally false data or misrepresent the efforts of citizens). Although most well trained offices using the powerful CMS applications as well as pre-populated databases of all registered voters should have been able to deal with most bad incoming data, most offices seemed to be unable to manage.

One major aspect of most messages and especially those generated through advocacy groups, is that the messages tend to be easily lumped into clusters that could receive the same response. Many offices and most of the CMS applications had methods, although rudimentarily, to separate the messages into clusters for assigning and coding them by which response should be used.

The Solution: The Topic Code and Exposing the XML Layer

Any solution to the problem needed be simple and easy to adopt, decrease barriers to citizen sending messages themselves or through an intermediary advocacy group and allowed congressional offices to better handle receiving and sending messages. The House Democratic Leadership set out to solve the problem. Majority Leader Steny Hoyer's office set up a test of this solution to help congressional offices.

The decision was made to test a solution with actual congressional offices that opened the XML layer to outside groups (many thanks to the office of Rep. Sam Farr who endured the most rounds of testing and giving feedback). Also, a Lockheed Martin's division (formally Intelligent Solutions) had added a new XML field or tag to their system in the previous year. The new field was called topic and was set to accept URIs (also commonly known as web addresses/URL's as well as lesser known URNs). The topic field (*see example 2*) would allow an individual sender or larger group to pick any URL that identified the topic of the message. Offices tested receiving test messages at first and then with the help of Care2 tested actual messages submitted through Care2's petition system. All of the tests proved successful, even with real world data.

URLs are universal, unique addressable codes that are compatible with XML as well as being widely used on the Internet. Using them for the topic field allowed for several possibilities. The most important aspect was to allow outside groups to add a code to messages sent by various citizens that would identify all of the messages as being part of the same effort. Additionally, the intention was that the URL picked would be the URL/web address that the advocacy group had posted a web page or form that described the topic of the message.

By using the URL that the citizen had visited as part of their sending of a message, the receiving office could:

1. immediately identify all incoming messages as being part of the same group with 100% accuracy;
2. let the legislative correspondent immediately click on the URL to see the genesis of the messages for quick research (in the current CMS, *see example 3*);
3. delete any campaign en masse if deemed fraudulent;
4. tabulate messages almost instantly since they could be clustered almost automatically by topic code, whether or not the individual messages had been read;
5. use their own topic codes for messages coming from their own web forms to allow for immediate data entry and tabulation;
6. avoid haphazard alternative solutions that did not seamlessly fit into their current system;
7. use the system for free;
8. learn the system in minutes;

9. be able to save hours of staff time weekly on assigning and handling incoming messages.

For the citizen, the use of the topic is completely optional, and does not create a two tier system for messages sent through advocacy groups and directly from the individual citizen to the congressional office. In addition, as standard URNs or URLs are adopted officially for legislative bills, those and other open standard URIs can be used to more accurately denote the topic of the legislation rather than solely for clustering purposes (note that although votes in the House do have a standard and archival naming solution by using the URL's, few people write in about past votes). Because the new system is designed to be much more transparent and efficient, citizens can feel that their words will be noted in a timelier manner, accurate and responded to on average more quickly.

For advocacy groups this new system provides some enormous advantages. First, messages will be easier to send now that the XML layer is exposed. Additionally, the system makes it possible for hundreds, if not thousands, of messages to be processed almost instantly by the receiving congressional office so that the time between mobilizing supporters and receiving offices tabulating results can be in minutes rather than the current days and weeks. By using a URL that is part of the organization's Internet domain for the topic code, the advocacy group is using a topic code controlled by the organization and does not need pre-approval or any form of coordination with any part of Congress. By using the specific URL of the web page used for the particular effort, the advocacy group is ensuring that the recipient congressional office will find what inspired the constituents to participate, give background information and indicate which group was able to rally a large number of supporters to their cause. Also, no one owns, has patented, controls or is paid for the use of the topic code.

Counter-intuitively, using the topic code can increase the chance that individual messages will be read by congressional offices. Currently, many offices just use keyword or phrases to attempt to cluster messages with varying amounts of accuracy without needing to read the messages that become clustered. In other cases, staffers skim the messages as quickly as possible to glean which response should be assigned. Only messages that do not fit into a cluster are likely to be given more attention. However, a topic code that uses a URL of a web page that asks citizens to include personal stories, will likely alert the researching staffer that the messages likely to include personally relevant information.

It seems important to mention that groups can send messages with an XML tag/field that says that the sender does not require/desire a response. Various CMS systems deal with that request differently. It is also important to understand that individual congressional offices are under no rule that requires that messages received are read, recorded, archived or responded to. For this reason the ability is generally not used, but can be.

Due to the testing overseen by the House Democratic Leadership, the topic code has also been tested with the less current Lockheed Martin CMS, and the InterAmerica CMS (the Monarch CMS system should have no problem with shortly adopting the topic code as well according to Monarch). Between the above systems, almost all House offices and most Senate offices can easily use the topic code system. For all congressional offices, there is no purchase necessary and the setting up the system can take either minutes or under a month at most for some. It is unknown how many can currently accept and use the topic code already, but everyone that uses the current Lockheed Martin CMS and has a public email address already accept the topic code. And as the system can immediately start making assigning responses to incoming messages much more efficient and save significant staff time and resources, and as there are workshops held to explain how to turn on and use the system, adoption could be ubiquitous for offices seeking to increase and improve constituent communications.

Except for Care2 there are not yet any outside organizations or commercial firms known to use the XML format and the topic field. However, as many offices can already accept the XML format and almost others can without cost, outside groups stand to fall behind competing organizations in bringing timely support in the form of constituents expressing support. In that the system is simple and easy to implement advocacy groups should be able to quickly add or develop the means to send XML formatted messages with topic codes to accepting congressional offices.

Future Developments

When the Congress settles on standards for legislative metadata (e.g. how bills and other legislative documents should be represented on the Internet and more legislative data is published electronically using powerful and well annotated standards (usually in XML with permanent and understandable URLs), then the opportunity for enhanced Internet communication will be possible. Unfortunately, there is no universal and unique naming convention for most documents, organizations and other important legislative objects for the Internet and many well meaning organizations have adopted proprietary solutions that are inherently incomplete in scope or audience. If Congress announces smart standards that use the URI system and well documented and meaningful XML formatted documents, a renaissance of Internet applications and web services will be possible. It is also crucial that organizations, individuals and Members of Congress use the promulgated standards.

Those standards, the use of the topic code and other Internet standards will help create an environment where organizations can publish online independently of each other, yet create what I have called "connected conversations." It is important to realize that a healthy online political ecology is more likely to exist when individuals and disparate organizations can control their own ability to publish and everyone uses a common language which accurately names common documents and other objects.

In terms of new technology, the use of simpler systems will more likely create a creative and complex political ecosystem. The most significant development is called REST or RESTful architecture. The best explanation of REST can be read in the book, RESTful Web Services by Leonard Richardson and Sam Ruby (<http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/9780596529260/>). Essentially, web sites can be both human readable and machine readable. The methods are simple and based on the Internet and web standards as they are currently. Future solutions to help improve citizens' ability to learn about legislation, improve communication with each other and elected representatives will likely come from adoption of RESTful web sites and web services.

Frequently Asked Questions about the Topic Code Feature

What is the cost to congressional offices?

All offices pay for CMS applications. There is no additional charge for the use or acceptance of the topic field in a message.

What is the cost to advocacy organizations or individuals?

Use of the topic field not restricted nor patented. There has never been any charge by any congressional organization for receiving constituent message nor will there be with or without the use of the topic field. Whether a commercial organization charges for services or software for forwarding messages to Congress that include the topic field as a premium is unknown. No commercial or non-profit organization paid for or contributed to the development of the topic field system with except as noted in the document.

Does an advocacy group need to get permission or be certified to send a message with the topic field?

There is no current certification for people or groups to send messages to Congress. It is questionable if any pre-approval, certification or other formal restrictions would be found constitutional. However, individual offices can decide to have email addresses and/or web forms which those offices can choose to deal with as they see fit. Currently, many offices have created barriers to receiving messages through the Internet. As long as, those barriers do not include payment or certification, barriers are within the rules of Congress.

Does exposing the XML format provide any risks to the office?

In that most offices currently accept XML formatted messages internally, those risks have already existed to some extent. However, in that some offices have accepted XML messages publicly for over a dozen years it is unclear what risks beyond the ones currently faced (bad data, unrelated correspondence, etc). Badly formatted messages have and will continue to not be automatically sent into the CMS systems.

Does using the topic field mean that offices will avoid reading messages?

The topic field is optional and the use of it does not preclude offices reading the full message from a citizen. As the current system allows offices to assign letters using inaccurate keyword and pattern tools, as well as skimming of messages, there will likely not be a change in how many messages get read. Staffing levels play a much more significant role in whether messages are read individually. However, the topic field is likely to promote reading messages for those campaigns that indicate that the messages will include helpful, new and/or personal details that offices might find useful to know.

Will offices save time accepting the topic field?

The answer is that dealing with incoming correspondence will be greatly assisted. As the volume of correspondence is likely to increase, especially during politically significant times, the topic field may save countless hours of assigning responses to incoming messages. Also, creating accurate and timely mail reports will be significantly improved.

Should advocacy organizations send in databases or other files with formatted data instead?

This stop gap measure has some serious incipient problems. First is that there is no official system for receiving email attachments (in fact, many offices have a policy of not opening attachments except in pre-approved circumstances). In addition, the ad hoc nature of this process currently favors groups that have special relationships with offices. Also, sending the messages in bulk preclude the ability of citizens to continue to send messages after the bulk file has been sent. In addition, as offices often pay for lists which are delivered as files as opposed to incoming correspondence, it will put a special onus for congressional offices to ensure that the file would not be classified as a gift.

Should advocacy organizations avoid other means of communications beside this system such as phone calls and paper materials?

Of course not.

What happens when advocacy groups forward messages that are deemed to be the work of bad or incompetent actors?

As always, it is up to a congressional office to have a good CMS and well trained staff that can ascertain whether incoming messages are bad. Most offices have access to systems that can tell if postal addresses are legitimate and registered voter lists to check names. However, there is no perfect system. In addition, using the topic field to cluster incoming messages will allow offices to delete messages based on the topic field in such cases.

Why not use CAPTCHA (logic puzzles or pictures) on web forms to keep messages that are not generated by actual citizens?

First there is damage made to representative government when barriers are put up. Having the noise of bad actors corrupt actual citizens' ability to be heard is a serious problem as well. Unfortunately, the CAPTCHA system is best used for systems where money or other very sensitive information is being captured, and petitioning government should not use restrictive systems. Furthermore, groups using the XML format with the topic field will run the risk of ruining their efforts by allowing bad data to be sent to Congress. And with better trained staff and using current and future CMS capabilities, offices should be able to deal with great loads of incoming messages and sort out bad ones and better deal with constituent messages.

Can congressional offices create their own topic field codes?

Yes, they can pick URLs from their own site. This may help them create easy to fill out web forms that allow their constituents to self identify the topic of their message. The topic field code need not be exposed or seen by the public to work (for example, the web form might just state pick the option to support or oppose a specific pending bill). The office could then use the topic field codes to cluster the responses to help save time.

Could advocacy groups use non-existent URLs?

Although it would not make any sense to use URLs that are not in a domain that the advocacy group controls, there may be reasons to use a URL that does not actually represent a real web page. For example, the advocacy group has a password protected area or their current web site uses bizarre URLs. In those cases, the organization might opt to create a URI (URLs are a subset of URIs) that was easy to understand, such as <http://www.advocacygroup.org/savetheplanet/voteyesonhr12121>. I would recommend having a better architected web site that allowed for better URLs. Also, the advantage of having a URL that the congressional office can quickly find may be viewed as less helpful.

Isn't using the keyword and pattern systems just as good as using topic code?

As long as certain advocacy groups send in messages without topic codes, then offices may find those features invaluable. However, the topic field code uses a well established system for the Internet, which is universal, unique and usually leads to a web page with additional information. Offices can use the topic code to assign affiliation and issue codes to their CMS records.

Why not use the ISSUE field (also known as SUBJECT) field for outside groups?

The IQ system (the current Lockheed Martin CMS) generally needs to only allow preset codes for these fields. The topic field is not a field that needs pre-populated values to be received properly as do the other fields. Also without an accepted naming convention there is no way to easily set the code without collaboration with the advocacy group and the system would likely not be universal.

Examples

Example 1: An example of an XML message that would be in an email sent to the CMS

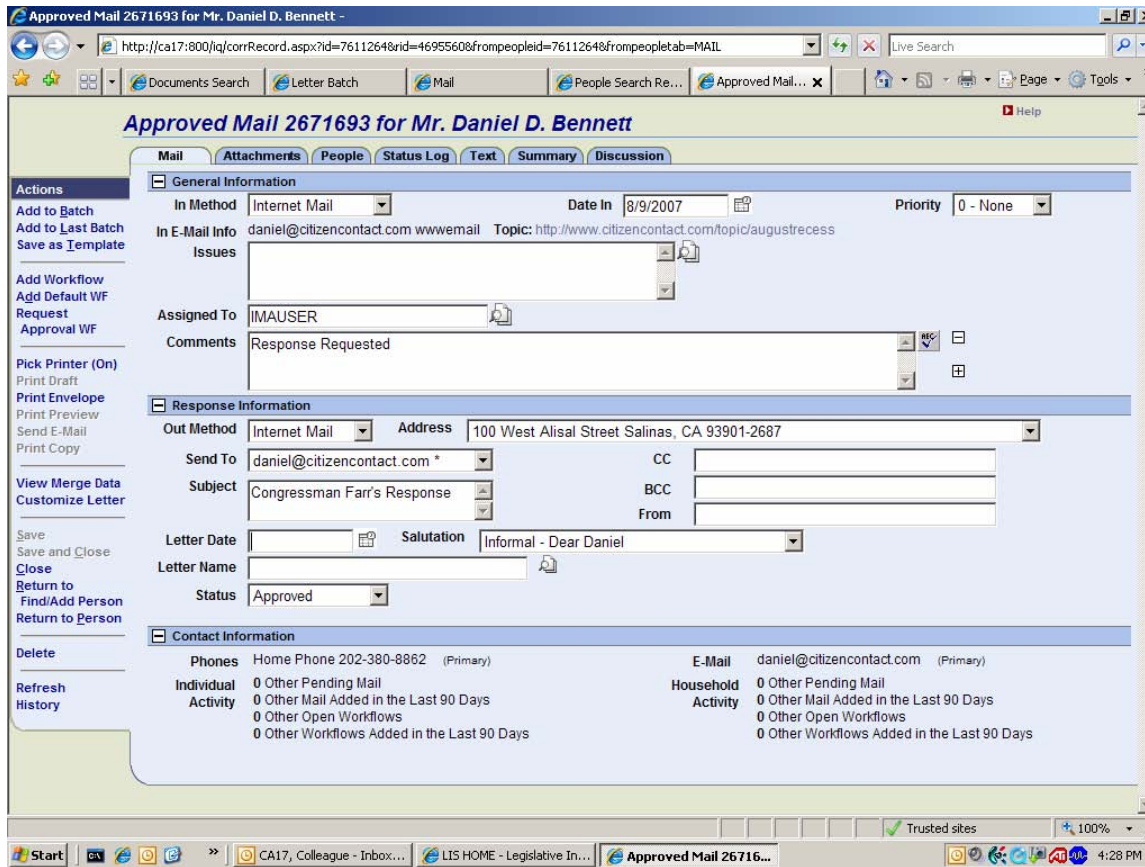
```
<APP>CUSTOM
<PREFIX>Mr.</PREFIX>
<FIRST>Daniel</FIRST>
<MIDDLE>Dylan</MIDDLE>
<LAST>Bennett</LAST>
<SUFFIX></SUFFIX>
<ADDR1>100 West Alisal Street</ADDR1>
<CITY>Salinas</CITY>
<STATE>CA</STATE>
```

<ZIP>93901</ZIP>
<PHONE>202-555-5555</PHONE>
<EMAIL>daniel@citizencontact.com</EMAIL>
<RSP>Y</RSP>
<MSG>This is a test of the topic system. Please contact Daniel Bennett at
daniel@citizencontact.com.
Thanks.
</MSG>
</APP>

Example 2: An example of the above XML message with the topic code added (emphasis added for clarity)

<APP>CUSTOM
<PREFIX>Mr.</PREFIX>
<FIRST>Daniel</FIRST>
<MIDDLE>Dylan</MIDDLE>
<LAST>Bennett</LAST>
<SUFFIX></SUFFIX>
<ADDR1>100 West Alisal Street</ADDR1>
<CITY>Salinas</CITY>
<STATE>CA</STATE>
<ZIP>93901</ZIP>
<PHONE>202-555-5555</PHONE>
<EMAIL>daniel@citizencontact.com</EMAIL>
<TOPIC>**<http://www.citizencontact.com/writecongress>**</TOPIC>
<RSP>Y</RSP>
<MSG>This is a test of the topic system. Please contact Daniel Bennett at
daniel@citizencontact.com. Thanks.
</MSG>
</APP>

Example 3: A screenshot of a received message using Topic code with clickable link in the Lockheed Martin IQ version 3 CMS (thanks to Rep. Sam Farr's office for example)



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Notes



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