



Association Tip-of-the-Month

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3 Tips for Interacting With A Social-Media-Savvy Congress

In just a few years, members of Congress have gone from social media newbies to veteran tweeters and Instagramers, according to research from the Congressional Management Foundation. Lawmakers' new social media know-how should change your tactics for engaging with them.

It's no secret that the federal government is often behind the technology curve. In January 2015, *The New York Times* profiled President Obama's top tech advisor, Megan J. Smith, an MIT-trained mechanical engineer and former Google executive, who was brought in to "bring her Silicon Valley sensibility" to an administration that in some instances still uses floppy disks.

"One of the things that we've seen a change in, even in the last six years, is that in 2010 there was still a general wariness of social media ... but we just didn't see that as much" in the new study, says Brad Fitch, president and CEO of CMF. "That's a big deal for Capitol Hill and Congress in general, because Congress in its 200-year history just hasn't been readily accepting of new technologies. The idea that they're embracing social media is huge."

Start Early

Don't wait for a public policy emergency to arise before you starting engaging lawmakers on social platforms. "It is a little bit like a lesson in public relations where they tell you, 'In crisis communications, once you hear the thunder, it's too late to build the ark,'" Fitch says. "Once a crisis unfolds on Capitol Hill, it's too late to build a relationship on Facebook. The challenge for associations is to build up their social media network with members of Congress long before they need them."

Some tactics for doing that: Ask your members to tweet at their representatives about your association's issues, and share meaningful resources and data points via social channels.

Start Small

"If you think you're going to jump into the social media swimming pool by influencing a Senate floor vote, think again," says Fitch.

Instead, try getting your toes wet on a much smaller scale, he says. "If you've got an important subcommittee markup coming up, and you've got a target of 30, 40, 50 members of the House, that's a little bit more reasonable. You can identify key contacts or ambassadors in key congressional districts and identify which ones might be willing to take the time to learn about your message or mission."

Be Interesting

Associations represent myriad interests and industries, and, fair or not, members of Congress are more interested in some industries than others, Fitch says. It can even be difficult for associations to maintain their own members'



interest and involvement in grassroots advocacy efforts, depending on the issue at hand. So, it's important for associations to be persistent and find unique ways to appeal to their own members and the lawmakers they want to reach.

"I know a lot of people who say, 'Well, my members are just too busy.' That's just an excuse for being uninteresting. There's been a lot of cases where people will get involved if they think it matters and if they believe in their cause," Fitch says.

"I myself have challenges getting on Facebook and Twitter as consistently as I should be and getting supporters on there. But you can't take no for an answer because this medium is here to stay."

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