

Handwritten letters: still the most effective persuasion

Michele Learner | Feb. 14, 2011

Viewpoint

Most Americans now use e-mail or other quick ways of getting in touch with businesses and friends. Urging members of Congress to end hunger is one of the few occasions all year when Bread for the World members and other people of faith actually write and mail a letter.

Are handwritten letters still one of the best ways to reach your representative and senators? Bread activists and congressional staff who speak from experience confirm that next to face-to-face meetings, letters from constituents of the member of Congress are incredibly effective.

Why? The answer is largely "quality versus quantity." It's easy to send thousands of copies of a single e-mail or letter to a congressional office. When it comes to gauging constituent opinion, staff members simply give less weight to communications that are or could be mass-produced.

After meetings on Capitol Hill, Bread activists and staff frequently report that members of Congress and aides have noted specifically the letters they receive from individual Bread members or through "Offerings of Letters."

A recent example: In late October 2010, a group of Bread members and faith leaders from the Indianapolis area met with the office of Rep. Andre Carson, D-Ind. Carson's district director said that Bread's 2010 campaign on tax credits for low-income working families, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, was the most striking he had seen on any issue during the year.

He was impressed that the letters were all individually written rather than just signed form letters or postcards and emphasized that personal, handwritten letters make the most impact. Some letters are given directly to the representative to read.

"In turn, we were really impressed ourselves -- both that our letters had gotten so much attention, and that our local organizing work was enough to make Bread's campaign the most-voiced issue of the year," wrote participants Larry Lindley and Dave Miner.

Bread's presence is strong in Indianapolis, home to more than 40 very active members plus a number of churches, all of whom help mobilize grass-roots action on our issues. But there are Bread members in every congressional district in the country; even districts with far fewer activist leaders still have the power to send a strong message to their elected representatives.

It's difficult to identify a "magic number" of handwritten letters needed to raise the profile of an issue. But several current and former congressional staff told Bread that their offices open a folder and begin tracking a topic more closely once they've received just five to seven letters -- a number well within the reach of a small Bread group or a church or campus Offering of Letters.

Research on the views of congressional staff carried out by the Congressional Management Foundation also supports Bread's approach.

In addition to noting that quality is more persuasive than quantity, the foundation says that advocacy groups should develop a good understanding of how Congress works and they should build credibility as an organization that understands the difference between being noticed and having an impact on Congress. This is how we can make the most of each of our grass-roots voices.

[Michele Learner is a writer for the newsletter of Bread for the World, *Bread*, where this article first appeared, in the January issue. Bread for the World (www.bread.org [1]) is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad.]

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