

## HOW TO SPEAK POLITICIAN IN 14 STEPS

**Recycling policy doesn't just happen on it's own. It takes hard work, diligence and a little bit of luck from advocates and elected officials who know how to play the game.**

**BY PAUL GARDNER**

**E**lected officials usually have a knowledge base that is an inch deep and a mile wide. They go from committee meetings, to constituent meetings, to caucus meetings and back again – all on completely different topics. They often depend on research or committee staff to fill them in on details and they could depend on you, too.

At the Recycling Association of Minnesota, I got to know the legislative process, but it wasn't until I was in the state legislature did I figure out a lot of other things. For example, who decides whether a bill is going to get a hearing, let alone come to a vote? What goes on behind closed doors that can help, or doom, your bill? Does anyone even care about recycling anymore?

While this is just one person's perspective from one state, I've written down a few things that might help recycling managers as they try to understand and navigate their state legislature.

### 1. Start with the big picture

In the grand scheme of things, recycling is good. Recycling is cheaper than disposal in the long run; it creates and supports more

jobs than disposal; it takes less energy, less water and fewer chemicals to make new products from recycled material; businesses usually save money by recycling; thousands of well-paying manufacturing jobs in your state rely on a steady stream of recycled materials; and demand for recyclables right now exceeds the supply.

These facts should be the foundation for anything else you have to say to elected officials and it should be your "elevator pitch." This message has to be constantly reinforced because the only interaction most legislators have with recycling is when they put the stuff at the curb.

### 2. Invite legislators and their staff to your facilities

Legislators love to visit local businesses and other organizations that are in their districts, or that serve their districts. I put two of my Minnesota legislature colleagues in touch with their county household hazardous waste (HHW) facility. They attended their community clean-up day and they loved it! Both helped unload cars, talked to their constituents, and by the end of the day, understood where the HHW went. They were happy to talk to their county solid waste staff

any time after that. A materials recovery facility (MRF) is always a popular facility to show, as are manufacturers who use recycled materials. Invite legislative staff as well, who tend to change jobs a lot. They might end up in a helpful staff position somewhere else in the future.

### 3. Get in the news

You don't always have to lobby to get your message out, but you should always try to get your issues in the news. Legislators are news hounds. They listen to radio, watch TV and read the paper thoroughly. Nothing gets their attention like a front-page color photo of TVs in a ditch. When I authored a bill for product stewardship of unused pharmaceuticals, there was a lot of press at the time about endocrine disruptors in our water. Legislators would follow the news and come up to me on the House floor asking to be co-sponsors on the bill.

### 4. Expect to get your issue caught up in something else

My colleague and fellow recycler Rep. Brita Sailer was the author of a product stewardship bill for paint. During that same session, we acted on a bill to increase the gas tax by five cents a gallon. When the paint bill came up for debate, some of the gas tax opponents latched onto the provision that would allow paint retailers to charge up to fifty cents a gallon for proper disposal instead of having taxpayers pay for it.

"Fifty cents! Holy cow, the gas tax was only five cents! During these tough times how can we tolerate this huge handyman tax?" Never mind the facts, we passed the bill easily, but opponents got the governor to veto the bill. You can always count on a little political chaos.

### 5. Recycling is small potatoes

Compared to the large responsibilities that legislators have for health and human services, education, public safety, roads and bridges, taxation and most importantly, constituents, recycling is going to take a back seat. Even in the context of other environmental issues, recycling does not always appear on legislators' radar compared to energy legislation, climate change, environmental permitting, state parks and trails, game and fish, and so on. There isn't a perceived crisis in solid waste. Your case needs to be compelling.

### 6. Don't burn your bridges

You'll always find elected officials who disagree with you, but your worst enemy today can be your best friend tomorrow. Recycling may be small potatoes at the legislature, but people like recycling on a bipartisan basis. Don't assume that someone will be against you because of their party label. Conflicts on recycling and waste tend to revolve around what the proper role of government is.

### 7. Be specific about what you want

Legislators are used to people asking them for something, so be ready to ask for something. It could be support for a bill, a chance to give comments on someone's proposal, a well-timed phone call to get something moving, or just a heads-up for something that they may see or vote on in the future. Sometimes it is just good to tell legisla-

tors about what you are doing just to "inoculate" them against ideas that are adverse to yours (e.g., someone wanting to eliminate your funding) that may pop up later.

### 8. Recognize advocates and say thank you

Politicians want to know if their work on someone's behalf actually made a difference. If it did, they will do more of it. Awards are nice if you offer them, but even just a letter at the end of the session that says "thanks" for leading on your issue is really effective.

### 9. Talk to the people who talk to the decision makers

You might not get regular face time with legislators, so get to know the people who do. These people include staff like committee administrators, administrative assistants, research staff and so on. Always offer to provide unbiased information and they will be quick to contact you when the need arises.

### 10. Know when to reach out to legislators

Plan ahead. Know deadlines for things like bill introductions, hearing requests, the dates when bills must be out of committees and to the floor, etc. Avoid springing last-minute surprises on legislators and their staff, unless you are calling their attention to a bad idea. If you are trying to educate someone from scratch about recycling, try to reach that legislator away from the capitol or when the legislature is not in session to minimize distractions and when legislators have more time.

### 11. Find an advocate

Don't assume that a member at the legislature will miraculously appear and be your advocate. As you talk with legislators, don't be afraid to ask someone to be your "champion." Newer legislators often look for something to specialize in that more senior members are neglecting.

### 12. Keep it concise and to the point

For in-person visits, avoid leaving a ton of paper like glossy folders. Use a one- or two-page fact sheet and point out what action you would like to see the legislator take. For emails and letters, keep it to a couple of paragraphs and ask for a specific action. If the legislator needs more information, he or she will ask.

### 13. Volume counts, sort of

Having your supporters send a mass of identical emails is not always effective, but it does put an issue on the radar. Personalized communication is better, with personal visits being the best. Organizing a "day at the capitol" is also worth the effort if you have enough supporters organized to visit their legislators.


Avoid sending your monthly newsletter or an organizational email update to all legislators. You might consider tailoring a short letter, fact sheet or e-mail just for members of a relevant committee

on an intermittent basis with the idea you want conveyed clearly stated. If you do it right, the next time you visit a legislator they will say, “I really appreciate the updates.”

## 14. Show that you understand opposing points of view and financial constraints

If there is some controversy about a bill, a legislator will hear from people on all sides of the issue. Your comments will be more effective if you can show that you have thought through the issue and weighed the pros and cons.

There’s plenty more that I picked up during my short, four-year tenure in St. Paul, but I hope that the

points in this article will help demystify the legislative process in your state. Good luck! 

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