

Building Relationships and Communicating with Policymakers

County extension council members are often asked to assist in communicating with policymakers. As the political environment is constantly changing, it is important to understand how to effectively build support through a continuum. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach has no control over environmental factors such as economic changes, energy crisis, environmental concerns, or the accelerating costs of medical care, but the organization can control the way it presents its message to policymakers.

ISU Extension and Outreach from the Policymaker's View

- Availability of public funds is cyclical with the economy. As a result, there is more emphasis on organizational transparency and accountability for public funds. The question is whether ISU Extension and Outreach is a priority program that justifies future funding.
- Accountability focuses on the impact (value) of ISU Extension and Outreach programs. The emphasis is on specific outcomes, not generalizations.
- Policymakers are interested in and supportive of programs that have a future impact on society. Historical contributions are of little interest. ISU Extension and Outreach must continue to conduct programs that are seen as contributing to significant economic, community, and social issues.
- Building and maintaining a strong base of support is a continuous process. It is not adequate to build support only at the time of a crisis. There must be constant public relations activity in prosperous times and lean times.
- ISU Extension and Outreach must package its message around public value statements. Effective communication must be stated in terms of the issues of interest to the public and public officials.
- ISU Extension and Outreach needs to continuously re-examine its support base. As programs focus on new issues, the challenge is to build an expanded support base around the issues and yet maintain the traditional base.
- County extension council members and clientele need to be able to interpret the results of ISU Extension and Outreach efforts and be empowered to communicate accomplishments to ensure sustainability.

Steps for Meeting with Policymakers

1. Know the protocol. Set up an appointment with the public official and be clear about the subject you want to discuss. Remember, if you cannot meet with the official, arrange to spend time with the staff.
2. Be organized. Take time before the meeting to establish an agenda and be specific. You are creating an impression about you and ISU Extension and Outreach to the policymaker. Be informative and factual without overstating your case.
3. If meeting as a group, have a pre-meeting. Take the opportunity to discuss which topics will be raised and who will raise each. Choose one person to lead the conversation and see that the agenda is followed.
4. Be appreciative. Acknowledge previous support and current action.
5. Always be a good listener. The comments and questions should provide insight into a strategy for follow-up materials on what to include in another meeting.
6. Be on time and take no more than the allotted time unless the elected official initiates the continuation. Try to stay on track with the pre-arranged agenda.
7. Leave a fact sheet. Make it concise. Relate impact of the program on their constituents.
8. Send appropriate follow up. Always send a note of thanks for elected official's time. Highlight positive response to any of the issues.

Communication Guidelines

- Write a “congratulations and looking forward to working with you” letter to each newly elected official.
- Keep correspondence concise. Written correspondence should include no more than a half page of text and may include a picture.
- All correspondence should include your name and contact information. This includes letters, emails, and faxes.
- The body of written correspondence should include: an introduction of the writer and statement of the purpose of the letter/email a statement of the position supported by using examples and facts, and a description of the action requested—ask for the policymaker to respond saying what he or she intends to do.
- Telephone calls should be to policymakers with whom you have developed a relationship or acquaintance with beforehand. Be brief and specific about the points you need to make concerning accomplishments, funding needs, or issues of concern.
- Treat phone calls with the same respect as a face-to-face visit.
- If speaking to a staff member, be sure to speak to the member who can handle the issue you are calling about. Follow up with written correspondence referencing communication points from a telephone call.

For more information on communicating with policymakers, see the following resources:

Davis, J.R. (2012). Building Partnerships and Communicating with Policymakers
https://psd.ca.uky.edu/files/building_partnerships.pdf

Iowa Extension Council Association www.iaextensioncouncils.org

Marketing Extension’s Public Value, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach
(Materials available through your extension office or from your regional director – MyExtension)