Communicating with Lawmakers
Is Citizen’s Responsibility Now

BY RHODA WEISS

Ken Strobeck knows a good deal about communicating with lawmakers. On one hand, he is director of public affairs, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oregon. On the other, he has been a Republican member of Oregon’s House of Representatives since 1994.

Strobeck began his career as a television news broadcaster and then did public relations work for a series of Oregon hospitals before joining Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oregon. At a recent Washington, DC, meeting of the American Society for Health Care Marketing and Public Relations, he offered his audience advice on how to effectively convey messages to elected officials.

THE CITIZEN AS COMMUNICATOR

Strobeck said citizens today have a responsibility to be their own communicators. He gave two reasons for this:

• Government at both the federal and state levels has, in recent years, restricted the activities of professional lobbyists.

• Lawmakers tend to take the opinions of actual constituents more seriously than those of professional lobbyists. “There is no substitute for the person who can push the vote button,” as Strobeck put it.

He urged persons interested in healthcare organizations—patients and community members as well as CEOs, board members, vendors, and employees—to communicate with legislators on behalf of those organizations. Why? “Lawmakers have the power to turn your business upside down,” said Strobeck. “You don’t have the luxury of being on the sidelines anymore. Your opposition is lobbying. Everyone needs to make his or her presence felt.”

KEEPING TRACK OF ISSUES

To get information about proposed legislation, the citizen-communicator should stay in touch with a representative of his or her professional trade association or organization (e.g., the Catholic Health Association). “It is a full-time job keeping track of bills, and government is a complex process,” said Strobeck. He noted, for example, that although more than 2,700 bills were introduced in the Oregon legislature last year, only 809 of those were enacted into law. “It takes someone familiar with the system to be on the lookout for what needs your attention,” he said.

He urged citizen-communicators to get to know which issues interest individual legislators. Not all lawmakers are knowledgeable about healthcare issues, Strobeck warned his audience. He said that at a recent meeting a representative noted that fewer than a dozen of his colleagues could intelligently discuss critical healthcare topics. “Who has the healthcare perspective in your state legislature?” asked Strobeck. “Who knows your issues?” He also recommended that the citizen-communicator get to know lawmakers' staff members, especially those who specialize in healthcare. “Rather than spin your wheels waiting to discuss an issue with a legislator, take it to the staff member, who will pass it on to the legislator,” he said.

Strobeck said the citizen-communicator should always try to approach legislative issues from the local angle. Despite the growing power of PACs, legislators are still most interested in hearing from local people—especially from those who hold positions of power or influence (“influentials” or “grassroots,” in today’s political parlance). “The decisions may be made in Washington, DC, or the state capital, but the battles are fought on Main Street,” Strobeck said.

GETTING YOUR POINT ACROSS

Letter-writing campaigns can still be an effective way to influence lawmakers, but only if the letters are genuine, Strobeck said; form letters are not taken seriously. He was more enthusiastic about using new media—for example, e-mail and telephone “conferencing.” He suggested that a citizen-communicator might arrange a phone conference involving, on one hand, a legislator’s staff

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REduce violence
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ple will be dying from firearm injuries
than from automobile crashes.
Violence against Children Homicide was the
leading cause of death among children
under age 4 in 1993, according to the
National Association of Children's
Hospitals and Related Institutions.
Nationwide, 808 children under 4 were
killed by physical violence that year. It
costs an average of $14,000 to care for a
child injured by a handgun.

Children can be damaged for life by
violence, even if they recover physically.
How do you place a monetary value on
the loss of a child's future? A University
of Missouri–Kansas City study found
that 40 percent of children under 15
who experience violence in the family
tend to lose interest in the future and
begin to live for the moment.

A PERSONAL COMMITMENT
How do we begin to end this violence?
Clearly we need to assess the impact of
violence in our own communities and
work with other organizations on
projects to reduce it (see Health
We can also present educational pro-
grams to our communities. Nearly 2,500
persons signed a statement disavowing
media violence throughout our system recently gave
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But, I believe, we must go beyond
these efforts. Violence is so pervasive in
our society that each of us in healthcare
must make a personal commitment to
actively work to reduce it in our own
lives—at work, at home, and in our
neighborhoods.

There are many ways that employees
in our organizations can make a personal
commitment to nonviolence. For exam-
ple, mission awareness teams (MATs)
throughout our system recently gave
employees an opportunity to sign a
statement disavowing media violence
and pledging to reduce its impact on
themselves, their families, and their
communities. Nearly 2,500 persons signed a
statement called "Say 'NO' to Media
Violence."

We found that our employees were
grateful for the chance to speak out on
this issue in a personal way. One MAT
chairperson said that many signees insist-
ced on using their own addresses, even
though the hospital address was offered,
because they wanted to make it clear
who was signing. She said some of the
hospital's security officers, who now
wear bullet-proof vests at work, were
eager to assist in preparing displays for the
activity.

We can also monitor our own lan-
guage and the language spoken in our
homes and offices. We may think lan-
guage is inconsequential, but we should
not underestimate its power. We each
have the ability to speak to others—both
those close to us and strangers—in ways
that can create either happiness or unhappiness, that can demean or inspire.

In marketing our organizations, we
can "focus on" rather than "target"
audiences, for example. Instead of
"shooting down" ideas and projects, we
can "take them off the table." We don't
need to put "bullet" points in our
newsletters and memos when we could
use "dot" points. Instead of being on
the "cutting edge," we can be "in the
forefront." In brief, I am proposing that
we find suitable alternatives to our own
violent language.

No one is safe from violence. It reach-
es us at home and at work. It is personal,
and we must meet it with a personal
commitment to nonviolence.

NOTES
2. Charlene Marmer Solomon, "Talking
4. Kristin L. Nelson, "Picking Up the Tab for
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pp. 38-45.
5. "Work Violence: Cost Guess Rises as
Definition Expands," Security, June 1995,
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6. Christine Woolsey, "Crime in Hospitals Calls
for Special Care," Business Insurance,
November 28, 1994, p. 10.
of Nonfatal Firearm-related Injuries: Beyond
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1995, pp. 1,749-1,774.
8. Charles Marwick, "A Public Health Approach
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member and, on the other, four or five
local "influentials." Each "influential"
could then tell his or her story from
notes developed earlier. "This is effec-
tive because in this way legislative
staffers can hear the views of actual
constituents at first hand," said
Strobeck. "It will seem like a sponta-
neous expression of support, even
though it was precoordinated."

Strobeck said citizen-communicators
should try to make legislators feel
as if they were part of the community.
"Invite them to your facility and give
them a tour," he said. "Personalize
healthcare issues by telling lawmakers
the number of persons your facility
employs, the amount of care it pro-
vides, the economic impact it has on
the community."

Lawmakers enjoy hearing news from the
community, Strobeck said, so the
citizen-communicator should remem-
ber to send them newsletters and infor-
mation about new developments.
"Consider lawmakers an important
part of your organization's communica-
tions plan," he said. "Make sure
they're on the invitation list for major
events."

Citizen-communicators can also
ingratiate themselves with lawmakers
by helping them develop legislative
research, by volunteering to work in
their campaign organizations, and by
making personal or PAC contributions
to their campaigns, Strobeck said.

PERSEVERANCE IS IMPORTANT
However, Strobeck also noted that
politics is an enterprise that has its lim-
its and disappointments, just like any
other. He urged citizen-lobbyists not
to give up if, after all their work, they
should fail to win on a particular issue.
"Good ideas will succeed eventually," he
said. "If your position has merit, it
will survive. Work on it again. No
politician—or hospital executive, for
that matter—became successful by
quitting after one defeat. It's the same
way with legislation."