



Chapter 5:

WORKING WITH DECISION MAKERS

For Effective Advocacy On Behalf of Early Education

Research has shown that communicating with legislators has been the most influential approach to influencing their vote.⁴ Elected officials give 75 percent of their attention and support to communication from constituents than any other source. The same research shows that personal contact from a telephone call, office visit, or letter is the most effective.

As you work with decision makers, remember to:

- keep the issue local;
- keep it personal;
- keep it concise; and
- put it in writing – have materials to give to officials.

Your goal is to build a relationship with the elected official, so do your research. Does the official have young children? What are her hobbies and interests? In what business or industry has she worked and what is her education? Find out about the official's legislative focus: What bills has he authored or supported? On what committees does he serve?

Methods of communicating with elected officials abound, so try a variety. Your group will find the method, or combination of methods, that are most effective.

- **Personal visits** – Office visits with state legislators don't necessarily mean making a trip to Sacramento. All legislators have local district offices where they can meet with constituents.

Visiting as a team enables you to get more information across, tell more stories, and bolster your expertise. A group of no more than three to four people is ideal – you do not

⁴ Burson-Marsteller, 1992

want to overpower the official or his aide. Be sure to let the official talk, as well. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't bluff. State that you will find the answer and get back to him. Then, be sure that you keep your promise as soon as possible following your visit.

Always thank your elected official for the visit and offer to be an ongoing resource contact person for her. Following up with a brief written thank-you note provides another opportunity to reinforce your message or add additional information.

- **Telephone calls** – Keep your message short and direct. You will usually speak to an aide or receptionist who will log your message. If you are calling regarding specific legislation, be sure to state the bill number and your position.

Enlist other influential or high-level constituents who the elected official respects to make calls regarding your issue.

- **Program site visits** – Inviting your elected official to see your program is one of the best ways to educate her on your issue. A site visit may be even more attractive to the elected official if the visit is held in conjunction with another event, such as a parent open house, where other constituents will be in attendance.
- **Web sites** – Elected officials often have Web sites where you can leave a comment or send an electronic message.
- **Letters** – Sending a personal letter is the tried-and-true way to contact your elected official. Keep your message to one page, if possible, stating exactly what you want the official to do. Always include your name, address, and phone number.
- **Emails** – Be sure to treat emails as professionally as you would a formal letter. Keep the message short, and put your request in the subject line, for example, “Please Oppose AB123.”
- **FAX** – Faxing your letter or other request to the elected official is, of course, faster than sending it through the mail. Some officials may prefer this method.
- **Blogs** – If your elected official has a blog, subscribe to it and make comments when appropriate. Always be professional and polite. And, if you or your coalition has a blog, you may want to point your elected official to it as an information source.

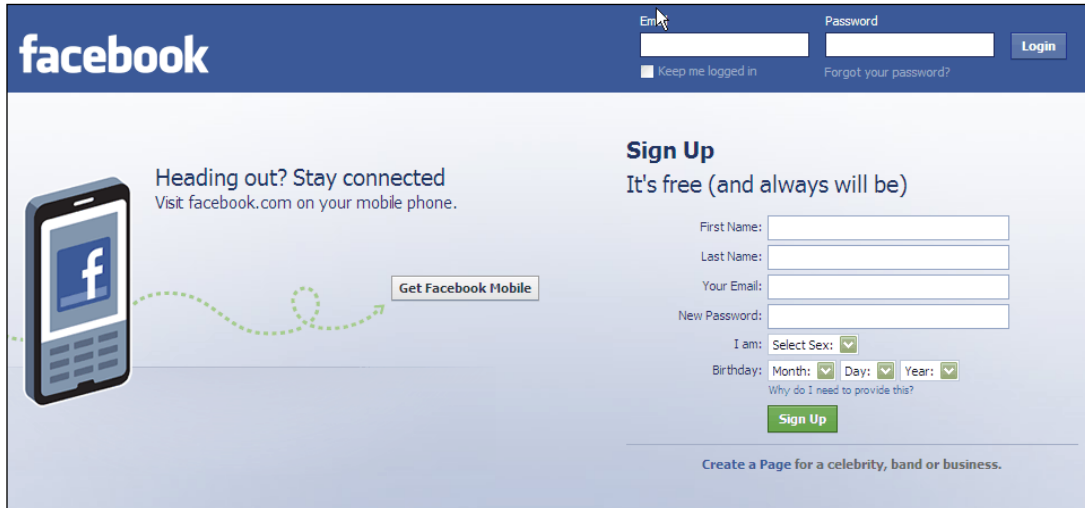
Social Media

Social media Web sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and many others, are fast growing ways to communicate with others, especially those who share your interests. These media provide easy ways to keep up to date with elected officials' activities as well as share your message with them.

- [Facebook](#) – The most popular social media Web site, Facebook has 400 million users who spend more than 500 billion minutes on the site every month. A series of networks,

Facebook provides users with access to this broad audience. When you create a Facebook account, you can link to others by “friending” them.

Facebook is free to users, and you can create an account for yourself as well as your advocacy coalition.



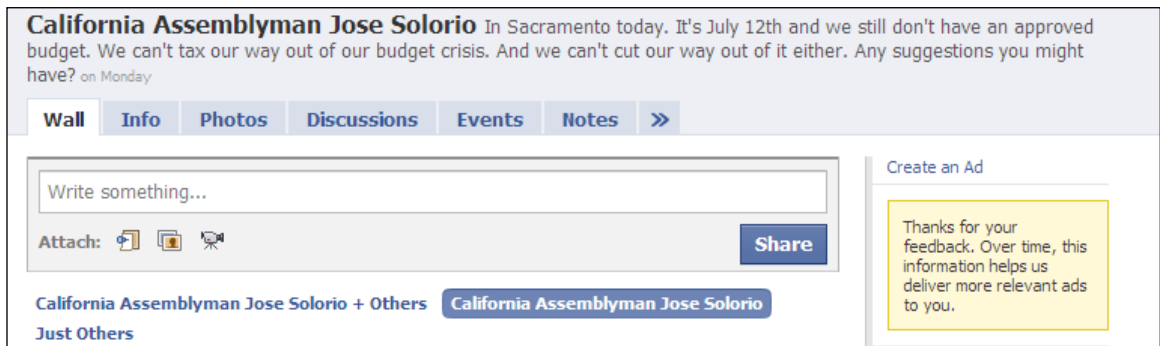
A Facebook page provides a place to display your advocacy coalition’s activities, provide updates and calls to action, and generate discussions:



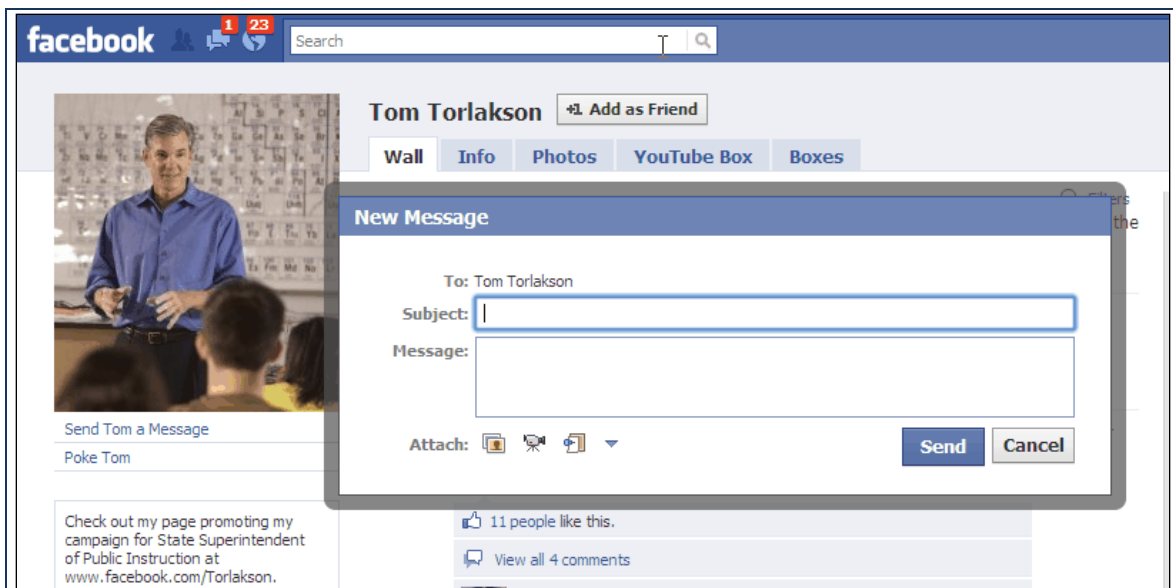
Some elected officials have created “fan pages” for themselves on Facebook where they share information about themselves, pose discussion questions for constituents, promote community events, and provide an easy way for people to contact them and share their views.



You can write a comment on an elected official’s Facebook “wall.” The comment will be visible for others to see, which could generate further discussion:

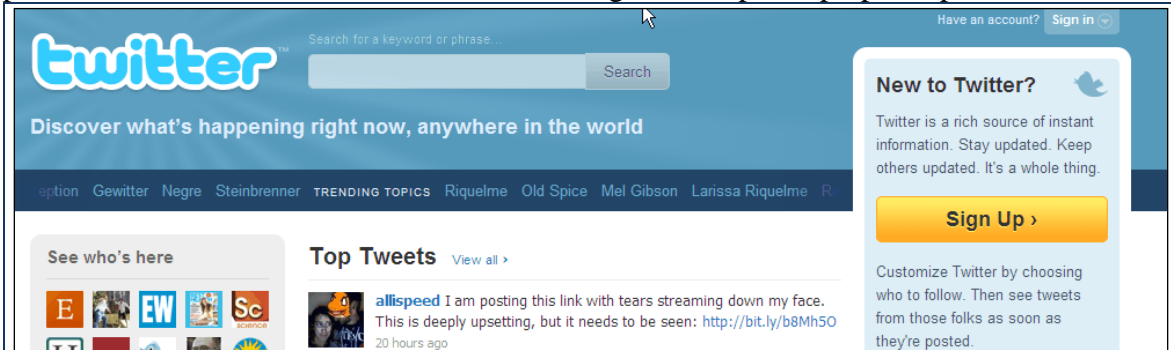


Or you can use Facebook to send the elected official a private email message:



[Twitter](#) – Think of Twitter as a worldwide blog, pared down to the briefest of messages. An estimated six million people post (or “tweet”) on Twitter, where each message is

limited to 140 characters. Messages are easily accessible as text messages on a mobile phone or other communication device, including a desktop or laptop computer.



Your coalition can tweet about your advocacy issues: current facts, action appeals, references to your Web site, or whatever promotes your cause. Recipients can forward your message to their networks (“retweeting”), thus spreading the news.

Some elected officials use the site, which means that “tweeting” can be useful for you and your coalition members as a way to tell officials what’s going on in your community. You can sign up to “follow” your elected official regularly.



Here are links to other resources about working with elected officials:

[The Nonprofit Lobbying Guide: Second Edition](#). (1999). Independent Sector

[NAEYC Advocacy Toolkit](#) (See pages 25-28)

[What Makes An Effective Advocate?](#) - Congressional Staff Survey Report

[Kansas Action for Children - Advocacy Toolkit](#) (See page 3)

[Building Relationships with Elected Officials](#). Independent Sector

[A DigiActive Introduction to Facebook Activism](#). (2008). Schultz. DigiActive.

[Welcome to the Facebook Era](#). Groundwire. Seattle, WA.

[Diving into the Twittersphere](#). Groundwire. Seattle, WA.

[Twitter on the Barricades: Six Lessons Learned](#). (June 20, 2009). Cohen. The New York Times.