

The Town Hall Meeting

A **town hall meeting** is a name given to an informal public meeting, and has been used in the United States since the 17th century. In today's world of modern technology, town hall meetings are also conducted via telephone conferencing. Everyone in a town or community is invited to attend.

Legislators use town hall meetings to espouse or defend their positions. They also use town hall meetings as a source for gaining great ideas. For the public, town hall meetings are excellent opportunities to learn where the legislator stands on an issue, to voice their opinions, to ask questions, and to get the legislator to make a public commitment.

Elected officials are attentive to constituents who attend town hall meetings. In today's environment a town hall meeting can attract anywhere from 20 to hundreds of constituents. Whether attending a location or telephone conference town hall meeting here are some tips for taking advantage of this unique opportunity:

- **Be prepared** – Constituents who come to town hall meetings with brief and thoughtful arguments, good data, and persuasive stories always get remembered.
- **Tell a personal story** – Members of Congress are always looking for first-hand accounts of how a policy might affect you or your family, business, or community.
- **Use numbers if you have them** – Use numbers by mentioning things like, “I have 50 employees,” “I represent 100 people,” or “There are 500 people in my community affected by this bill.” Someone representing other constituents is extremely influential to lawmakers.
- **Be polite** – “I pay your salary so you better listen to me” is not the best phrase to use when talking with your legislator. Rudeness is not a tactful way to persuade someone to your side. Legislators respect those who reason and are willing to have a dialogue.
- **Go in groups** – A chorus of voices speaks louder than a single voice.
- **Talk to staff** – Every legislator brings staff to town hall meetings. Tell them your story before the meeting and get their business cards. You'll be creating a champion for your cause within the office.
- **Leave papers** – Both your state PAC and ADPAC produce flyers on the latest issues effecting dentistry. Take these flyers with you and give them to your legislator. Besides being a good talking point reference for you, the papers will also be a good reminder to the legislator for when he/she returns to their office.
- **Follow-up** – A few days or a week after the town hall meeting do a follow-up phone call or email to the legislator. Thanking the legislator for answering your question is a simply way to remind the legislator about the issue. If the legislator was unable to answer your question, then the follow-up is a good reminder that you are still waiting for an answer.
- **Get your dental friends to meetings** – When a legislator hears the same question at different town hall meetings, the lawmaker will wonder, “Why is everyone asking about this?” Hearing the same thing in different places signals to a legislator that there may be a deeper problem afoot.
- **Provide feedback to your dental lobbyists** – After interacting with a legislator, it is vital that you provide feedback on what happened to your state dental PAC or to the ADPAC office at 202-898-2400. Then the next time the lobbyist meets with the legislator they'll mention your town hall meeting question. This will let the legislator know there is a connection between the lobbyist and the constituents back home.