

How to lobby your MP and make a point

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WHENEVER a hot-button topic erupts, Members of Parliament now notice a peculiar trend in the e-mail messages and Facebook posts coming their way.

Several have the same phrases and appear to have the same template, even though they were sent by different people.

The topics could range from advertisements that some find objectionable to culling of wild boars to homosexuality - but the lobbying techniques are remarkably similar.

It's as if large groups of people have been rallied to express similar opinions - and to make sure that the MPs hear them.

This technique hit the headlines after a how-to guide for supporters, put together by church network LoveSingapore, was leaked. The guide contained advice on reaching out to political leaders to express support for Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between adult men.

Over time, Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad has received 100-odd messages on various issues, including Section 377A.

Most of the time, the feedback he gets "comes from residents who show they're seriously concerned by leaving their addresses, for example", he said.

"But usually, if we see a similar template in many messages, we know it's a campaign for that specific issue."

Lobbying the Government online via e-mail and Facebook is becoming more common here, particularly when it comes to issues involving religion and moral values, MPs told MyPaper.

Mr Baey Yam Keng said: "It's easy to spot when the e-mail messages have been orchestrated - either they are sent to the same distribution list or the message is similar, but certain words have been changed."

The Tampines GRC MP recalled receiving "a few" such messages during the furore over a billboard advertising American retailer Abercrombie & Fitch, which featured a topless male model.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh said that, in the past, he would receive physical petitions signed by a group of people on a certain issue - for instance, the culling of wild boars in 2012.

"Now, we get some e-mail messages that come with different names, but the content is the same. I've been seeing this more over the last couple of years," he said.

The how-to guide put together by LoveSingapore had encouraged supporters not to "use church or religious rankings or titles" when sending such messages.

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan said that he does not believe that LoveSingapore is seeking to "create a false impression in the public opinion", but rather to give those with a strong conviction a "nudge" to share their views.

But Dr Carol Soon, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that masking religious markers could be misleading. "The campaign may create the impression that objections to homosexuality cut across different segments of the population," she said.

Said Mr Baey: "Every view is important, but I will keep in mind that they may represent only a certain group and may not be a true representation of sentiment."