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Knowledge is Power



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"Legislation - The Work Begins at the Grass Roots Level" by Kirk Grundahl

The Constitution of the United States says that our nation is built upon the principle that we have a "government of the people, by the people and for the people." This has one inherent responsibility attached to it—people must be involved in governing. This is why WTCA has embarked on a significant industry-wide objective for our chapters— "Putting a Human Face on the Truss Industry." Without this type of activity, our future destiny is controlled by those who are actively involved in the legislative and governmental process. To have a voice, our industry and its members must be seen and heard. If we are not, whatever happens to us will be at the whim of whoever does take the time to have this voice and we will have to hope that they have our industry's best interest in mind. Any bets on this happening?

In November we held our third annual round of chapter summits. Clayton Traylor, Staff VP for Political Operations of NAHB, provided a key presentation that was enthusiastically received by all attendees. Clayton spoke about the type of grass roots work needed to have a positive impact on local perception and legislation. What follows are some of the key concepts that he provided.

LIFE CYCLE OF AN ISSUE

Issue reaches "critical mass." In our industry this may be a series of articles written about truss performance due to a major fire that led to the death of one or more firefighters. In these types of circumstances, it becomes awfully easy to blame the construction industry, or even the truss industry, rather than admit that human error on the part of the fire service is to blame.

Problem is defined. The fire service may use rhetoric to convince themselves, local city officials and the public that wood trusses kill firefighters, even though this could not be further from the truth.

Solutions advocated. In the U.S. there is always a demand for a solution. The easiest solution to adopt is the usually the first one proposed that falls close to the existing knowledge base on the issue. The solution that is proposed depends on who is proposing it, the knowledge of the actual facts that they have and any bias that has already been promulgated by "educators" they are familiar with. If our industry is out there providing good factual information, guess which solution is going to make the most sense? If not, you probably already know what can happen.

Adoption and resolution. Legislation is formulated to implement the proposed solution.

Education. People are educated on the good that has been done through this new legislation which solidifies its place in the market as a public good and makes it virtually impossible to remove it from the law even though it may not be the optimal solution. This provides us with the foundation for the typical legislative process that takes place in our nation. The question for us is how do we get involved?

BEING AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE

Get organized. This is the reason that we have developed chapters. We are organized and everyone in the chapter should be monitoring local activities and staying abreast of issues that may negatively impact our industry. Each chapter should have a legislative chair whose function is to monitor and alert. This can most easily be done by developing liaisons with other groups in the local area that have similar interests like the NAHB, Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Manufacturers, etc.

Identify and monitor issues. This should be the goal of the legislative chair.

Be prepared to educate. This is the reason WTCA developed 13 educational programs called Truss Technology Workshops. By being proactive in our market through education, misinformation is less likely to be translated into bad legislation.

Develop solutions. One of the goals of the educational process is to understand the questions and the concerns that the market place has about the products we produce. The better understanding we have, the easier it will be to find positive solutions when the time comes that we need one.

Advocate your position. This should be fairly easy for all of us that care deeply about this industry and believe in the value it has for the country.

Be politically active. Attend county, township and city council meetings; be involved and get appointed to task groups dealing with local construction issues; be involved as a volunteer in local, state and national politics for the political party to which you belong; hold fund raising events, etc. When you are involved, people naturally listen to you. As a consequence, you have a significant voice.

ORGANIZING FOR ACTION

Get all the facts. This is particularly important in formulating strategies and developing a plan.

Prioritize your issues. Attack the most important issue first. This does not have to be a reaction to a negative issue, but it could be. The best position in which to find ourselves is to be able to be proactive in our market to prevent any issue from becoming a problem. The key then becomes defining and prioritizing potential issues, and developing a plan to provide education

and advocacy before an issue emerges as a problem.

EDUCATING

Identifying key audiences. This includes elected officials and regulators, building officials, specifiers, the fire service and media. The goal for each chapter must be to define a program based on who they believe needs to be educated first in the markets they serve. Each of our 13 educational programs can be tailored to your specific audience. The key is to identify and have a plan to reach them with a fact-based industry message.

Make your story relevant. Use examples. Be topical. Keep it simple. Look for ways to show how the truss industry has a positive impact on the local market/community in terms with which the audience can identify. Provide examples of local projects that trusses were supplied to, charity projects performed, etc.

Provide industry handouts to use during the meeting and as something that each audience member can take with them for their files. The information provided will vary by the audience type. Ask WTCA what we have available for the meeting and if we don't have something that meets your needs, we can quickly create something for you. Our new brochure, *Introducing the Structural Component Industry*, is an excellent tool.

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

Speak with one voice. This is the reason that WTCA committees and Board of Directors develop policies on key industry issues. The chapter should know what the industry policy is and use this as the key message to be delivered in the market. A united singular message will be heard and comprehended.

Be focused. When interacting with a legislator or audience, do not stray from the message that the chapter desires to be delivered. It is easy to be distracted and lose an opportunity to make a positive impact.

Offer solutions. Where there is a problem issue, think of ways to turn the problem into an opportunity to help. This desire to help often will lead to a positive solution and outcome.

Be appreciative. Always be thankful for the opportunity to provide a point of view and to help. This will open more doors to do the same in the future.

GETTING POLITICALLY ACTIVE

Political Contributions—Individual. Clearly, money drives the process. People that provide contributions have a stronger voice than those that do not—just a dose of political reality.

Political Events—Get out your vote. An example of a great event that also will draw legislators out to our industry manufacturing facilities is to hold a chapter-oriented truss plant tour in the

months preceding an election. This serves two key purposes—get the potential legislator familiar with our industry and they get the chance to talk with chapter members and employees who are also voters who could potentially vote for them. This is a great draw.

Other political events worth considering include dinner parties, golf tournaments, participating in and donating materials for a charity like Habitat for Humanity, etc. All can include fundraising to generate political contributions.

Be active in campaigns and party activities. As stated previously, one of the best ways to have an influence in politics is to be involved in the process. When you are involved, people generally listen to your points of view, particularly if you have been helpful in the past.

INDUSTRY EVENTS FOR OTHER CONSTITUENCIES

Truss Plant Tours, Truss Technology Workshops and Golf Tournaments. Each of these events can be used to educate and develop relationships with any group. The focus should be on local groups (e.g., fire service, building officials, specifiers, framers, etc.) that the chapter prioritizes as important. The events can then be geared to the specific interest of the group.

STEPS TO GETTING INVOLVED

1. Hold a chapter meeting to define a legislative chair and legislative committee and begin the issues definition process.
2. Have chapter members of the legislative committee talk with local aligned organizations like NAHB, NAM, Chamber of Commerce, etc. to get a feel for all the local issues with which all related organizations are contending and how the chapter can most effectively help.
3. Hold another meeting to put all the issues on a flip chart and prioritize issues.
4. Develop an action plan to tend to issues that includes:
 - Keeping it simple and focused so members are not overwhelmed with the magnitude of it all.
 - Seeking out Truss Technology Workshop opportunities for market education.
 - Holding Chapter events to develop relationships with legislators, specifiers, building officials, fire service, framers, builders, etc.
 - Planning election year events for the chapter to use to invite candidates to learn about our industry and talk to potential voters.
5. For all actions taken as a chapter, show our industry's appreciation for the opportunity.
6. Repeat the process annually.

The final key concepts for consideration are:

- Ask not what the industry can do for you, ask yourself what we should be doing for our industry. Let's not "trust" others to help us—let's help ourselves instead.
- Include in the job description of all truss industry owners and managers to be actively involved in putting a human face on the truss industry locally. If there is not a commitment to it being a key part of the job, it will never get done.
- It is easy to think that this job is someone else's to do and when a problem arises we go looking for the person who failed or we make someone else the enemy. Sometimes our lack of involvement makes us our own worst enemy.

Let WTCA know how we can help each of you become more active in the local market. One of our goals is to support these types of activities to the full extent we can. Implementing these concepts should make putting a human face on the truss industry much easier to do.

[SBC HOME PAGE](#)

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