STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE
January/February 2005

Adventures in Advocacy

Congratulations, Congressman! Now What? by Sean. D. Shields

Imagine, for a moment, last November you were elected to the United States House of Representatives. After Election Day, you were most likely jubilant and filled with a sense of accomplishment. That emotion was probably supplanted quickly by a strong sense of relief. After all, you just spent over $1 million in six months for your campaign efforts, and most of it was hard earned money belonging to someone else. If you are at all a realist, that relief disappeared very quickly, leaving you alone with one last emotion: panic! “Great, I’m elected,” you think to yourself, “now what?”

If you played along with this exercise you may have some idea as to what every member of Congress goes through when they first get elected. Whether it is their first time, or their twenty-forth re-election (kudos, Rep. John Dingell from Michigan), they all have to successfully navigate the post-election process of organizing their offices and choosing their staff. In addition, they need to secure their committee assignments, lay out their public policy objectives, and begin drafting some comprehensive legislation to benefit the constituents back home.

Why should you care about the stresses a congressional representative is facing? In the short run, it may help you understand and appreciate why at the May Legislative Conference you find yourself visiting with a legislative staffer, and why other times you get to talk with the lawmaker but they seem more interested in your unusual belt buckle than the issue you’re there to discuss. In the end, it may encourage you to visit with your lawmaker on home turf by inviting them in to your plant, or at least meeting in their district office while they’re not in Washington, D.C.

In general, the three things a newly elected member of Congress has to worry about before anything else are: establishing offices, staffing those offices, and getting desirable committee assignments. For the rest of this article, allow yourself to actively participate in the decision making process using your present geographic location and fellow coworkers as reference points.

Okay, first you need to decide how many offices you want to provide to your constituents so they have a physical place to interact with you. Some things to consider are the physical size of your Congressional District, each of which contains approximately 647,000 people. If you live in an urban area, those boundaries may be relatively small, anywhere between 10 and 25 square miles, but if you live in a rural area, those boundaries may be quite large (kudos, Rep. Don Young who represents the entire wilderness known as the State of Alaska). In general you'll establish between one to three offices in the major population centers within your district (Rep. Young, however, has eight), and adjacent to the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.

Second, you’ll have to decide how many staff you are going to hire and how much you are willing

to pay them. Since you already have to start thinking about your re-election campaign less than 18 months away, money is always tight. As a consequence, you will probably have a maximum of three staff in your district offices (one per office in many cases), and five to ten in your D.C. office. The first person you hire is your Chief of Staff; this is likely the individual you trust with your life and possibly the person most responsible for your successful election to office. Make no mistake, this is not your spouse, this is the person who ran your campaign and most likely slept less than two hours a night for the five months preceding your election. They will then help you make the hiring decisions for all the other staff positions: receptionist, legislative director, communications director, and a host of really smart, really young policy analysts. Most of the people you hire are from a pool of individuals that worked on your campaign or live in your district. Again, you will pay them all, with the exception of your Chief of Staff, as little as the market will bear because every dollar saved is another dollar that can be devoted to ensuring you get to keep your job in two years—and as you know campaigns are very expensive.

Third, you have the monumental task of convincing the powers that be, the House Majority or Minority Leader, you will be most effective and faithful if you get to sit on your committee of choice. Being a former small business owner, or employee of one, you may want to get on the House Small Business Committee, where you can have the opportunity to work alongside colleagues who are just as interested in pro-business legislation as you are. Ultimately, these distinguished lawmakers may be the ones who grant initial approval to the small business tax reform legislation you plan on sponsoring. You don't serve on only one committee; in most cases you'll be asked to serve on two, including three subcommittees (the Tax, Finance and Exports Subcommittee under the House Small Business Committee, for example, looks specifically at export opportunities and the impact of changes in trade policy on small businesses). What this means is you will have to become knowledgeable in other societal issues like transportation, energy or the environment.

So, now you have your offices set up, they're staffed, and you have your committee assignments in hand. You're ready to start doing some good for the people of your district and the United States. Wait, and now they're knocking at your door and want to talk to you? Who's got time for that?!

Questions or article topics can be sent to sshields@sbcmag.info.

SBC HOME PAGE

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