



Adventures in Advocacy

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Hitting Closer to Home

by Sean D. Shields

Okay, let's have a show of hands of those who have attended the Legislative Conference in Washington, DC in the past and either were unable to meet with your actual Congressperson, or you did, and they seemed less than attentive in your meeting. It may be that your particular lawmaker is not engaged in the many important legislative and regulatory issues facing our industry, but more likely, it stems from the fact that lawmakers are inundated with requests, concerns, information and arguments.

You've undoubtedly read about the power, there's plenty of it within the hallowed halls of our national Capitol. You've heard about the money, which seems to flow as freely as the Mississippi while lawmakers are in session. Naturally, these two entities converge at some point, and it generally is in the company of our nationally elected members of Congress. Shocked? Probably not.

However, what's missing in this discussion is the vast amount of vital decision-making and weighing of issues jam packed in every moment of a lawmaker's day. If they don't meet with you, or they don't seem engaged, it's because they're wrestling with an untold number of other issues that seem to them to be of vital importance. I don't mean to sound too idealistic, but lawmakers do care about you and your business concerns, whether or not they appear to at the moment you are scheduled to meet with them during your conference visit in May.

They care because you are their constituent, and you represent real jobs, economic growth, affordable housing and local prosperity. You and your employees are the very individuals who have handed them the reigns of responsibility, and they will listen to what you have to say. As Kendall Hoyd noted in his **Editor's Message** (page 7), going to Capitol Hill, with all its excitement and high-profile pressure, can be just the beginning in the process of developing a relationship with your legislator. They do listen, amidst all the distractions, but may not be able to be as attentive as they would like to be. However, as Kendall notes, these meetings can lead to much more attention during a more relaxed meeting in the home district.

For this reason, in addition to your participation in the SBC 2005 Legislative Conference in Washington, DC on May 4-6, we're encouraging component manufacturers and suppliers to set up meetings with their lawmakers while they are in their local District offices. As mentioned in the January/February column, U.S. House of Representatives generally have one to three offices, while U.S. Senators can have up to seven located in major population centers around the state. The concept is that, given the relatively calmer and slower paced environment of their District office, you will have more success in forging a one-on-one relationship and in generating an understanding of your concerns.

Of course, a District-based meeting doesn't have to occur in the legislator's office. As Kendall found, taking them on a tour of your manufacturing facility can be also be very effective. While you are less likely to have time for a one-on-one meeting, you have the benefit of being able to show your lawmaker first-hand the nature of your business and size and scope of your operations and employment base. Nothing says "economic growth" more concisely than a few truckloads of building components, fresh off the assembly line, leaving your plant on their way to a jobsite.

There are a number of ways these meetings can be arranged. If you already have a relationship with your lawmaker, either through past Legislative Conference attendance or a similar experience, you may choose to contact their local District office yourself to schedule a meeting when they plan to be in town. But, if you don't relish the idea of doing all the talking yourself, you may want to schedule a District meeting through your WTCA Chapter, where multiple companies can send representatives to a single meeting. In addition, WTCA staff is always here to help you in any way that we can. Just give us a call if you are interested in pulling together a meeting.

Don't worry, you don't have to go to a meeting with your lawmaker empty handed. WTCA staff is currently compiling a full complement of talking points on a number of national issues facing this industry. Much like the materials prepared for the meetings at the Legislative Conference in May, these talking points can help you in delivering strong facts and industry perspective to your elected officials. There are also full-color state maps illustrating the local breadth of the building components industry, as well as the new WTCA Policy Handbook for 2005. Additional materials are also being added to the new SBC Legislative web site (www.sbcleg.com), which you can always check for the latest information or legislative and regulatory issues.

A District office meeting is one of many relationship-building tools. It can serve as an important step in building that bridge toward having an advocate for you on national issues. However, there really is no substitute for showing your personal commitment, and traveling to their Congressional office in Washington, DC. It may be a wild and crazy place, but it's where the actual decisions are made and the votes are cast. Scheduling these national meetings is essential in order for our industry to be heard, but each visit can be made more successful if the groundwork is already laid at an earlier meeting within the District office.

If you would like more information on how to set up a District meeting or plant tour, or how to get your local WTCA Chapter involved, give me a call at 608/310-6728, or send an email to sshields@qualtim.com. **SBC**

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