

# Adventures in Advocacy

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## Taking on your Lawmaker *Mano a Mano*

by Sean D. Shields

In my last column I argued that establishing a good working relationship with your elected members of Congress may take more than an annual visit to their office during the May **SBC** Legislative Conference. As a consequence, I also mentioned WTCA's efforts to encourage component manufacturers to visit with lawmakers when they are in the home district offices. What I neglected to discuss is what you should do if you actually meet with them. In an effort to rectify my egregious error, I offer the following suggestions:

**One, be yourself.** While this may be common sense, it is the single most important piece of advice. Even though lawmakers, in their official role as an elected representative, may be confident or even arrogant, you will be served best by doing what you do best: being yourself. Not only will your message be more sincere, it is more likely they will remember and trust you and your opinion.

**Two, talk about what you know.** You may own and run a business, manage a business or work tirelessly to improve the products and reputation of a business. Whichever the case, you know a great deal about the problems and issues your company faces: cost of materials; workforce quality and ability to provide them health care coverage; adequate risk management and affordable insurance premiums; and accounting, taxation and reporting requirements. Government can provide relief in almost every case, if effectively persuaded to do so.

Don't hesitate to begin any meeting with a discussion of what you do, what your company produces and what issues you specifically face. Remember, your lawmaker is a representative for YOU, and it is their responsibility to address your concerns on a national stage. Beyond the valuable perspective you provide, this sort of discussion can help everyone feel more comfortable at the meeting.

**Three, come prepared.** After the lawmaker knows who you are, what you and your company does, and some of the issues you face, it is a good idea to be prepared to talk about some industry-wide issues. WTCA is here to help you in that endeavor. In many instances, on issues like immigration, softwood lumber, steel or construction defect litigation, talking points have been developed for you to use. Talking points are just that, brief statements that can provide either pertinent facts or

concise arguments you can use to help you talk about a given topic.

In addition, WTCA has developed a new **Policies & Positions Handbook** with updated information on issues facing the structural building components industry. This document is something you can give to the lawmaker before, during or after your meeting as a reference guide. In addition, the new handbook makes full utilization of the latest advocacy tool in your arsenal: the **SBC** Legislative web site ([www.sbcleg.com](http://www.sbcleg.com)). It will always be a good idea to check this web site before any meeting with a lawmaker to get the latest information on hot-button legislative topics. Content on this web site will be continually updated as new information becomes available.

**Four, be timely.** Lawmakers are dealing with a large number of issues at one time, but they aren't dealing with every issue. There will invariably be times when a problem facing your business is not on their "radar screen."

While they may politely listen, it can be virtually impossible to convince them they should do something about it in the short term.

In some cases, this is due to the fact their time, and that of their staff, is fully extended in its current commitments. Adding something new, unless they see a direct and broad connection to their overall constituency, is out of the question. In other cases, they may judge that such an issue would be exceedingly difficult to make any progress on with their colleagues on Capitol Hill. If it can't be tied to something already in the national spotlight that particular session, they may judge it isn't worth the effort.

However, if you follow the advice above about utilizing the handbook and the web site, this shouldn't be a problem. There is a committed staff working behind the scenes to monitor legislation and trends in Congress to know what's going on and what trends are emerging so that you can always be timely and know how to tie your issues to the national issues that your lawmaker is already in tune with.

**Five, be brief.** This is different than being in a hurry. Don't skimp on sharing vital information about yourself, your business, or the issues and perspectives you want to share with them. What this does mean to highlight is the fact lawmakers are BUSY people, and, for that matter, so are you. Everyone will benefit from a meeting that is just as long as it needs to be.

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### Talking Points:

- WTCA staff is very interested in assisting our membership with developing relationship with both state and federal lawmakers.
- It is very important to establish these relationships in the lawmaker's district as well as in DC.
- When meeting with your lawmakers it is important to be yourself and talk about what you know and avoid the three Ts.

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That's why talking about yourself and using talking points to discuss everything else is so important. It allows you to avoid the three T's: tangents, trivia and tall-tales. Tangents are the statements and stories you may find coming out of your mouth if you don't know what you're talking about or what point you're trying to make. Talking points and the handbook are your single greatest allies in avoiding such tangents.

Trivia are those bits of information or facts you share that don't really support your statements or give strength to your argument. Throwing trivia into the discussion can obscure the good facts you are supplying, or in a worst-case scenario, confuse the lawmaker. Again, talking points and the handbook can help you avoid trivia as well.

Finally, tall-tales are the stories you find yourself telling a group of people at a social function for entertainment value. This isn't a comment on the truth of the story, just the proper time and place for them to be told. As a rule of thumb, unless you are a long-time friend of the lawmaker, these should be avoided at all costs.

If you avoid the three T's, you will drastically improve the odds of scheduling a future meeting with your lawmaker, and that your message will be understood and possibly acted upon. In that regard, it's never a bad idea to follow up a meeting with the fourth T: the thank you note! **SBC**

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market heads into the late spring selling season, according to the latest National Association of Home Builders/Wells Fargo Housing Market Index (HMI). (See chart.)

The April HMI edged down by three points to 67, but remained within the strong 67-71 confidence range that builders have held throughout the past 14 months.

"Builders continue to express confidence in the overall housing market and expect sales to remain strong during then next six months," said NAHB President Dave Wilson, a custom home builder from Ketchum, ID.

"Favorable market conditions and the appeal of homeownership continue to fuel demand," said NAHB Chief Economist David Seiders. "Many builders are reporting higher lot prices and some difficulty in finding available land, both symptoms of strong demand for new homes. NAHB expects both home sales and house values to remain healthy in coming months," he added. [Source: National Association of Home Builders Press Release, April 18, 2005]

## Health Care Top Concern of Small Businesses

Health-care costs rank as the most critical issue concerning small business owners, according to a recent survey conducted by the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) and Wells Fargo. Nearly two-thirds of respondents to the 2004 survey listed health-care costs as "critical." NFIB is supporting calls for federal legislation to allow small business to aggregate under an association to get health benefits similar to those now achieved by large companies.

## New OSHA Web Site

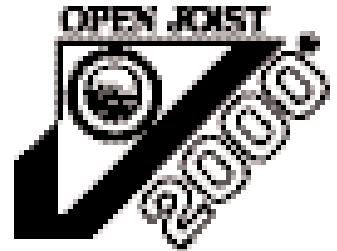
OSHA has launched a web site containing information and tips related to the safety and health of residential construction workers. Visit [www.osha.gov/SLTC/residential/](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/residential/) for more information. [SOURCE: *The Journal of Light Construction*, Nov. 2004, P. 20, [www.jlconline.com](http://www.jlconline.com)]

## Keeping Up on Code Changes

There is no completely easy answer for people interested in keeping up on code adoptions, however, one fairly accurate and complete site for current implementations is [www.firstsourceonl.com/index.asp](http://www.firstsourceonl.com/index.asp). It requires a login registration (which is free) so that they can send you email, but otherwise it offers a great deal of information regarding the current status of building codes and links to state, county and municipal resources. **SBC**

Email ideas for this department to [builderbanter@sbcmag.info](mailto:builderbanter@sbcmag.info).

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