



Legislative Conference, Plant Tour Helps CM Establish Relationship with Lawmaker

by Emily Patterson

After attending his first WTCA Legislative Conference, Plum Building Systems' Rick Parrino caught the advocacy bug. It's easier than you think!

I've never been interested or involved in politics, even on the city level," says Rick Parrino, vice president and general manager of Plum Building Systems, Inc. in West Des Moines, IA. He even admits that when his wife ran for local government more than ten years ago, he didn't make it to the polls to vote. So how does a man with no interest in politics end up hosting a plant tour for Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA), chair of the Senate Finance Committee and a major player in the ongoing softwood lumber dispute? Parrino says it's simple, "I've learned a ton from WTCA, and it's paying off."

Parrino's political involvement began slowly. As a member of the WTCA Board of Directors, he began traveling to Washington, DC in 2002 for the annual legislative conference. It was in preparation for his first trip to the nation's capital that Parrino became politically involved. Working from a list provided by WTCA, he called members of his Congressional delegation.

"I called Grassley's office, left a message and happened to get lucky," he said. A Grassley staffer called Parrino back. While a meeting with the senator couldn't be arranged due to scheduling conflicts, the staff member set up an appointment for Parrino to meet with Everett Eissenstat, chief international trade counsel for the Senate Finance Committee.

"If your legislators are open to meeting, anyone can do what I've done."

"The meeting went really well," Parrino said. "We went all over the softwood lumber agreement. That meeting was instrumental in working with the senator on this issue."

During the meeting with Eissenstat, Parrino briefly met Senator Grassley. Parrino said Eissenstat recommended that he continue to try to arrange a sit-down meeting with Senator Grassley. "It was Eissenstat who said, 'This is the guy you need to talk to.'"

at a glance

- ❑ How does a man with no interest in politics end up hosting a plant tour for Senator Chuck Grassley?
- ❑ The benefit of being involved is there may come a time when you will get a chance to have a direct voice and make a difference.
- ❑ There are great opportunities to get involved in local political activities and serve on committees that are looking into issues that are vital to our industry.

The next year when Parrino returned to the legislative conference, he formally invited the senator to visit his plant. The senator's staff said they would put him on a list, noting Grassley tried to visit each of Iowa's 99 counties at least once a year. In February of this year, Grassley's office contacted Parrino to let him know the senator would be in his area. "They said Senator Grassley would like to schedule a time to stop in," said Parrino. "A few emails and phone calls back and forth and we had it all set up."

When the big day came, the plant tour was a mix of politics and socializing. "As soon as Grassley came in, he was all over the issue," said Parrino. The two discussed the softwood lumber debate and covered a number of talking points provided by WTCA. "The exciting part was that Senator Grassley came pretty well prepared. He was up to date on the issues."

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But the visit was more than just business, Parrino pointed out. "He told me, 'Rick, I'm here to see your employees.'" The senator visited the plant for more than an hour, taking time to meet the staff (see photo on page 54).

Parrino said that the senator also talked with employees on broader national issues such as taxes and cutting back on spending and tied those issues back to the industry. "He told us, 'You guys understand the volatility that's going on, and how in many ways, this is a stock market-like business. You can take a job and lose money even before you've begun working on it.'"

Admitting he was impressed with the senator's knowledge of issues affecting the industry, Parrino said he was equally pleased with the senator's willingness to take the time to interact with staff at the plant. "He shook everybody's hand—he's a super down-to-earth guy," he said. "It was great for morale at the plant." Parrino commented that he thinks the visit was a learning experience for everyone to meet a lawmaker and hear first-hand about all the job requires. "I don't think people realize how hard he works or what he goes through. He told us about a bill that was recently signed into law that he started working on six years ago."

Parrino also noted that the visit helped put the company's political involvement in perspective for staff. "It let them know that we're being recognized for our efforts," he said. Parrino commented that he thinks employees now better understand why he travels to Washington, DC and spends time out of the office working on policy issues with lawmakers. "My boss sees it as a good investment, too," he said.

To thank the senator for his visit, Plum Building Systems had a plaque made including a group photo of Grassley with plant staff. "It's our way of showing our appreciation for all he's done over the years," said Parrino.

All of the excitement and grandeur of the visit aside, Parrino said he sees a number of benefits from his relationship with the senator's office. "Senator Grassley's office has been great. They've always been willing to tell us how to go about [accomplishing our goals on the political front]." The senator's office has also helped introduce Parrino to other major political players. When Parrino was working to garner bipartisan support on the softwood lumber issue, Grassley's office helped him with ideas for a meeting with Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) to ask him to do a sign-on letter, requesting all parties involved to find a definitive resolution. "Even when Senator Grassley's office couldn't do something [directly], they helped us set it up, or told us what we could do."

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Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1974 and the U.S. Senate in 1980. He is currently the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, in addition to sitting on the Senate Judiciary, Budget, Agriculture and Joint Tax committees. Here he pauses with Rick Parrino during the February plant tour to look at a 3-D drawing showing how the parts manufactured by Plum Building Systems fit together in the field.

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Parrino said that reaching across the aisle for bipartisan support on the softwood lumber issue was easier than he expected. "Up until last year, I hadn't met Senator Harkin, but I've enjoyed working with both of our senators," he said. "They've been great and done a lot for us. I'm proud of them."

Looking back, Parrino said that becoming involved politically within the industry has been an exciting and relatively easy process. "Follow the lead of the WTCA," he said. "If your legislators are open to meeting, anyone can do what I've done."

He noted the importance of being politically involved on all levels—federal, state and local. "We have begun to hold our own chapter legislative conference in Iowa (as part of the Iowa Truss Manufacturer's Association) and invite state legislators in to talk with us," he explained. "We have a very active association here in Iowa. We get a lot done and try to stay current and up to date on all the issues." He pointed out that these state legislative conferences are a good way to build relationships with lawmakers closer to home.

The value of making connections with political leaders was obvious at a recent local conference in March. "We found out that they were creating a State Fire Code Advisory Board, so we got on the list to become part of the committee that is working on this issue. A couple of days later we learned we were on the Board," he said. "It got us more involved. Now we can help make sure that any changes to the fire codes don't negatively impact the industry."

Getting to Know Your Lawmakers 101

Want to have a lawmaker come and visit your plant? Here are some guidelines to help you plan ahead and have your plant tour go smoothly.

- **Contact WTCA.** Advice is just a phone call or an email away. WTCA staff can help you contact a lawmaker's office, provide talking points and give tips on proper political etiquette. Contact Sean Shields at the WTCA at 608/310-6728 or sshields@qualtim.com.
- **Start early and don't be discouraged.** If you want to invite a lawmaker for a plant tour, invite them sooner rather than later. Lawmakers have very busy schedules and often plan events many months in advance. When communicating with a lawmaker's office, don't be disappointed if you deal with staff instead of the lawmaker. Staff members play a vital role in scheduling events and focusing on policy issues. These people can be a valuable resource and help ensure that you go through all the appropriate steps to set up a plant tour.
- **Get your house in order.** Get your plant in tip-top shape for the tour. A cleaning and safety overview will get the premises ready for an official tour. Take the time to prep staff so they know that a special visitor will be on site and the proper etiquette when interacting with him or her.
- **Be mindful of who you tell.** It's natural to want to get the word out that you will be having a special guest, but take into account that when it comes to politics, not everyone will be as excited as you are. Advertising the visit ahead of time can attract demonstrators or others who want to use your tour as a soapbox for other issues. Keep track of who you invite to the event, and be sure that only those who were invited are on site the day of the tour.
- **Follow up and show your appreciation.** When the tour is over, be sure to show your lawmaker that you appreciate him or her taking the time to visit your plant. Sending a thank you card or memento of the visit is a good way to show your appreciation and continue to build a positive relationship. Also, if there are any unanswered questions from the tour (statistics you didn't have readily available, etc.) use this opportunity to follow up and keep the lines of communication open.

Parrino admitted that his experiences over the past few years have transformed him from a person with little to no interest in politics into an advocate. In fact, he now encourages others to get involved in political activities and in particular WTCA's legislative conference. "Especially for those who haven't been to DC or visited a legislator's office—until you walk down those halls, there's nothing like it," he said, explaining how he still gets a rush of excitement going to legislative visits on Capitol Hill and seeing Secret Service staff and TV personalities. "Just do it. I can't imagine anyone [getting involved politically] and not enjoying it." **SBC**

For help with establishing relationships with your lawmakers, contact WTCA Staff at 608/274-4849.

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