



Build Strong Relationships

Getting the Worm

Rookie. Novice.
Trainee. Freshman.

by Sean D. Shields

The General Election of 2006 brought us 50 brand new members of Congress. That's a lot of new people to bring into an organization all at once. Just imagine if more than ten percent of your workforce was hired yesterday. It would be a challenge to maintain production, wouldn't it? Each of those employees need training, a chance to practice the skills required to do their job, and time to build relationships with those around them who will support them in accomplishing their work.

Congress is no different. There are 50 lawmakers in Washington, DC that go through that same process. "Freshmen" lawmakers are excellent individuals to reach out to because they are just now starting to develop a relationship with their constituency (that's you) in an effort to do their jobs well. There are at least 50 individuals who need an introduction to the building components industry, and you're a perfect person to give them that introduction. If you live in a district where the incumbent lost, or didn't run, call your new member of Congress today and invite them on a tour of your facility.

Be an Early Bird

It is an excellent time to roll up your sleeves and capitalize on this situation. In the early part of 2007, Congress is just getting started, and lawmakers generally do a lot of traveling back to their home districts for extended weekends. In these early winter months it's also likely your production capacity isn't maxed out, so you probably have some time to devote to a guided tour.

Look at January through March as "lawmaker season." Armed with safety goggles and a thorough knowledge of your business, you can concentrate on showing your elected officials how a bunk of 2x4s quickly becomes a stack of ordered trusses ready to be delivered to a jobsite. Simply put, plant tours are the most effective way to cement your company, and this industry, into their minds. And these winter months are the best time to host such a tour.

Why? Because while new members of Congress already have some good connections in your community (otherwise they never would have been elected), they don't have nearly the network most established lawmakers have. The best way to become part of that network is to build a relationship with them in the beginning. Think of yourself as an early bird. We all know what the early bird gets!

Follow the Leaders

Herb Hildebrand from Casmin answered that question when he took the time to arrange a meeting at the office of his Senator, Mel Martinez (R-FL), last year. After the meeting, Herb said, "I could see the light bulb go on as I shared how these issues affected our company." More importantly, he felt he was able to make a good connection with everyone at the meeting: "If I called them, they'd take my call. This was very valuable from a networking perspective." Senator Martinez is now the newly-elected Chairman of the Republican Caucus, a very powerful position. The entire industry will have the opportunity to benefit from the relationships Herb established through that meeting.

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at a glance

- ❑ "Freshmen" lawmakers are excellent individuals to reach out to because they are just now starting to develop a relationship with their constituency.
- ❑ There are a number of new committee Chairs to begin building relationships with now that the Democratic party controls both chambers of Congress.
- ❑ The winter months are a good time to devote time to giving plant tours. Call your new member of Congress and invite them on a tour of your facility.

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Building Strong Relationships

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There's also another opportunity you could capitalize on. There are a number of new committee Chairs to begin building relationships with now that the Democratic party controls both chambers of Congress. In the Senate, Max Baucus (Montana) is the new Chair of the Finance Committee; Patrick Leahy (Vermont) is the Chair of the Judiciary Committee; and John Kerry (Massachusetts) is Chair of the Small Business Committee. In the House, John Conyers (Michigan) is Chair of the Judiciary Committee; George Miller (California) is Chair of the Education & Workforce Committee; and Nydia Velazquez (New York) is Chair of the Small Business Committee. If you live in the state or Congressional District of one of these lawmakers, your active participation will have a positive impact on behalf of the industry.

Speaking of new leaders, Glenn McClendon, Sun State Components, and Mike Murray, A.C. Houston Lumber, met with their Senator, Harry Reid (D-NV), in 2006. Having never visited with a member of Congress before, Mike said, "I felt really good about this meeting. I felt we were able to establish a good relationship with him; he was very accessible. I also learned which methods to use to make sure our views are heard in the future." That's especially valuable information to have now that Senator Reid is the Majority Leader of the Senate.

Focus on Core Issues

Jobs. Economic Growth. Affordable Housing. These things are the foundation of a vibrant community, and are priorities of most lawmakers. And this means you have a built-in common link with any lawmaker. Fortunately, they are all made possible through you and your company, a fact that should not be lost on any elected official. Your voice has power in Congress, as long as you use it and talk about the issues affecting your company. For instance, it is clear there are

some things in this country that are broken: our immigration laws and our health care system are two examples of areas in need of overhaul, which affect our industry significantly.

Building a relationship with your lawmaker now, through phone calls or plant tours, will enable you to share your important perspective on these issues once Congress starts debating potential solutions.

Get More Worms

Knowing your lawmaker and his or her staff can be beneficial beyond influencing legislation. Your lawmaker's office is also a powerful contact to have when you need help interacting with OSHA or other regulatory agencies. They can also help you find grants to pay for training your employees on new technology or production techniques. Uncle Sam has a lot of money available for such things, and many times the best person to put you in contact with it is your Congressperson. In addition, your lawmaker can help you get to the bottom of a workers' compensation claim, or find a solution to dealing with an overzealous transportation enforcement official.

In this regard, being an early bird in building a relationship with your lawmaker now, not only will help you "get the worm," it might help you get more than one! Time is precious, and many times there isn't enough of it. However, it is possible to more than make up for the time it takes to host a plant tour with your members of Congress when one subsequent phone call to them can help you resolve a permitting issue that threatens to hold up your production for days.

As you may have read in last month's issue (see "Plant Tour of Duty," December 2006), WTCA staff is ready and willing to help you schedule a plant tour or office meeting with your lawmaker. **SBC**

Contact Sean Shields at sshields@quallim.com or 608/310-6728 for more information about scheduling a plant tour or office meeting with your lawmaker.



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