



Build Strong Relationships

Tag, You're It!

In this game of tag, both players turned out to be winners.

by Sean D. Shields

Raise your hand if you hate "phone tag." Step 1: You call an important contact, they're not there, you leave a message. Step 2: You run out to the shop floor, the contact calls back and leaves you a message. Repeat steps 1 and 2 until you almost forget what you called for in the first place. It's frustrating isn't it? It's certainly not the easiest way to build a relationship either.

Dean DeHoog, Trussway-Sparta, MI, experienced a similar kind of "tag" in trying to meet face-to-face with his Congressman, Pete Hoekstra (R-MI). Dean traveled all the way to Washington, DC last May to participate in the 2006 SBC Legislative Conference for the first time. He had an appointment with Rep. Hoekstra, but when Dean showed up for the meeting, Hoekstra wasn't able to be there. He had to be on the House floor for a vote.

Fortunately, Dean had an opportunity to meet with the lawmaker's staff, and share some of the issues his company was concerned about, including immigration reform and providing affordable health care. "It was a productive meeting," said Dean, "his staff was very competent and really listened to my concerns." Understandably, he was a little disappointed he didn't get the chance to meet his lawmaker. So Dean left an invitation (a "you're it," if you will) for Hoekstra to tour his manufacturing facility any time he was back in the area.

In October, Hoekstra's office called Dean to take him up on his invitation for a plant tour. "They said he was in town and wanted to come by the next day," remembers Dean. The short notice was a surprise, but ordinarily he would have done anything to accommodate his lawmaker. However, there was a bigger problem: "I was leaving for Houston to attend BCMC the next morning. I couldn't do it."

The good news was that his lawmaker was willing and eager to try again. In January, Dean received a similar phone call indicating Hoekstra wanted to come by for a tour of Trussway. The call came in on a Friday, and the tour was arranged for the following Monday. "I can understand the short notice, his district is huge," said Dean. How huge? 5,508 square miles. Dean added, "It's quite a bit of ground to cover, so I really appreciated his willingness to take the time to visit our plant."

So after a brief game of "tag," Dean and Hoekstra finally met face-to-face in the foyer of Trussway's offices. Dean showed him around the office and explained their bidding, design and sales process for their single-family operation. This discussion quickly turned to the challenges facing Michigan's economy. With the U.S. auto industry suffering, the backlash is affecting almost every other aspect of life. Unemployment is at an all-time high in the state, which has contributed to the large number of existing home inventories and the subsequent slow-down in new housing starts.

Before the tour of the production facility began, Rep. Hoekstra told Dean he had gone on a tour of another local truss plant five years earlier. As luck would have it, Dean knew the company, and also knew it had recently shut down. "Compared to our current facility, that place was pretty antiquated," said Dean. "It gave us a chance to really highlight the technology we use today, from wireless networks and computerized saws, to a completely paperless system where all our plans and designs are online."

Hoekstra was impressed as he watched Trussway's three component saws running simultaneously, and he enjoyed shaking hands with many of the production employees. That interaction prompted a discussion about Congressional efforts to reform the national immigration system. It gave Dean an opportunity to show his lawmaker first-hand how important it is to pass reforms that enable foreign-born citizens to legally continue working in the U.S., but don't unfairly punish employers who unwittingly hire an individual illegally in the country.

"I thoroughly enjoyed taking him on a tour of our facility," said Dean. "He was very interested in our business and asked a lot of very good questions. Best of all, he was enthusiastic about keeping in contact with me."

Hoekstra has followed up on that enthusiasm. By February, his office had already contacted Dean and set up an appointment in his Capitol Hill office when Dean travels to Washington, DC in April for the 2007 SBC Legislative Conference. As such, Dean was the first person to officially have a confirmed lawmaker meeting out of all the conference participants.

That's not all. Hoekstra also accepted another invitation by Dean: to speak to conference attendees during the Tuesday night reception. It turns out, Hoekstra is a close friend of Rep. Donald Manzullo (R-IL), who spoke at the conference last year. It's anyone's guess who will be "it" next. **SBC**

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at a glance

- Dean DeHoog recently welcomed Congressman Pete Hoekstra to tour Trussway's Grand Rapids facility.
- The visit gave Dean an opportunity to show his lawmaker the importance of immigration reform.
- Thanks to their relationship, Hoekstra accepted an invitation to speak to SBC Legislative Conference attendees in Washington, DC.

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