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Grassroots Efforts at Work — Voices for the Value-Added Industry by Kelli Gabel

Jack Louws and Roy Schiferl have been heard in the publication of the Seattle Times (front page, January 6, 2003). But how? Their message, "level the playing field between the U.S. and Canada, then we can compete," has been the same message being spoken for years. What inspired feature writer Bradley Meacham to share the voice of the value-added industry and hear their quandary?

When Bradley Meacham composed an article titled, "Trade War over Wood" in the Seattle Times Business Section, November 17, 2002, Schiferl appreciated his efforts. So Schiferl, Operations Manager at Woodinville Lumber in Woodinville, WA, called staff at the Value-Added Wood Products Alliance (VWPA) and discussed the article and possible options for telling Meacham their side of the story. Out of this discussion came a great idea to give Meacham a call, while staff followed up with factual data via email.

"I called Brad and voiced my opinion and appreciation. The article was well written—it was dead on. I gave him Jack's name and number, as well as other contact information. I guess you could say I got the ball rolling by establishing a relationship and received a positive reception for the impacts due to this issue on the value-added industry. It was that simple," says Schiferl.

As for Louws, owner of Louws Truss in Lynden, WA, he has firsthand political experience. He is currently the mayor of Lynden, WA. His effort began with his chapter, the Northwest Truss Fabricators Association. "Personally contacting the state of Washington U.S. Senators and Representatives sparked the interest of the press in the U.S. and British Columbia," notes Louws. "Government and the mass media are and have been well aware of the impact these tariffs are having, but the value-added sector was not recognized or taken into consideration before."

The article focused on the number of businesses and people being affected by the U.S. tariff on lumber imported from Canada. The Softwood Lumber Agreement (SLA), which was in effect from 1996 to 2001, was implemented as a means to protect U.S. lumber companies by limiting supply and ultimately making Canadian lumber more expensive for U.S. lumber consumers. But the quota under the SLA, and now the tariff which went into effect in May of 2002, apply only to the raw lumber, not the finished product, such as wood trusses, wall panels, pallets, windows and doors—all parts of the value-added industry.

Louws cited his firsthand experience on the impact of this dispute. He faced a difficult decision to lay off one-third of his employees in 2000. "I'm being punished for operating in the U.S. It doesn't make sense that I am not able to provide living-wage jobs just because I am on this side of the border," commented Louws, whose truss manufacturing plant is five miles from the border of Canada's British Columbia.

With the help of Louws and Schiferl's publicity, the value-added industry has been recognized in Washington, D.C. as well. On December 5, 2002, the value-added sector participated in the Section 332 hearing before the International Trade Commission (ITC). Representing the industry were Schiferl, Louws, Phil Luneack, Kent Pagel, Kirk Grundahl and Tom Denig. More recently, on January 31 and February 3, 2003, discussions including members of the value-added industry voiced our industry's positions with the Department of Commerce (DOC) and the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) on the need for a quick and enduring resolution to this dispute.

As seen here, grassroots efforts had a significant positive impact on the value-added industry's profile and role in the U.S. economy. Unfortunately, our work is never done. Industry members must continue to contact elected officials at all levels of government both in their local and state offices as well as in Washington, D.C. on the effects that governmental edicts like the tariff have on our businesses.

SOWING SOME SEEDS OF YOUR OWN

What can you do to promote your cause through a grassroots approach? Invite elected officials from the local or state level out for a plant tour and a conversation with your staff. Also consider informing your state media of the current issues affecting your business. Invite local media contacts for a plant tour and establish some relationships. Remember, your story, if timely and of human interest in your community, will make it to the top of the list for local newspaper editors and news anchors to report about. Lastly, join in with your local chapter and become involved. Louws and Schiferl have developed a close friendship out of the chapter process that has also added great value to our industry efforts. Always remember that two voices are better than one.

One Vote, One Voice—You CAN Make a Difference

Anyone familiar with the inner workings of the political scene knows that, historically, lobbyists in Washington, D.C. have depended on the “three Bs”—booze, blondes and bribes—to entice politicians to cast votes that are favorable to their particular cause. In recent years, with the developments of modern science and technology, other methods have been found to be more understated and usually more effective. Many studies have been released on surveys conducted on Capitol Hill to determine the most effective approaches to lobbying. The majority consensus is that businesspeople from the state or congressional district and ordinary constituents have the largest impact on the decisions made by legislators.

For example, the Sierra Club was recently named the most influential environmental group in Washington, D.C. However, this distinction was only made since they shifted the 80 percent of their resources once spent on lobbying in Washington to grassroots organization and involvement.

Based on the studies that were done, following are the most effective approaches to reaching your legislators:

Visits:

- Legislators know the difference between paid staff, lobbyist and constituents—you vote!
- By definition, legislators are the generalists and you are the expert.
- Focus on one or two issues, not a laundry list.
- Give specifics: real numbers and names.
- How does it affect your legislator's district?
- Bring your business card.
- Follow up the meeting with a personal letter.

Personal letters are better than form letters:

- Be specific.
- Be timely.
- Explain your position.
- Ask for a response.

Each member of Congress has the opportunity to decide the fate of any and all legislation that enters committee or goes to the floor for a vote. Now is your time to help them decide! Use your voice on behalf of the value-added industry at this year's Legislative Conference April 30-May 2.

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