

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

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One Way, One Voice (Tips for How to Contact Your Legislator)

Speak up! That's the only way your voice will be heard. Review these tips for effective communication with your legislator.

In the [April issue](#) of SBC Magazine, WTCA President Dan Holland explained why legislators and other elected officials want and need to hear from us: "Our products are used in America to help make the housing industry the engine of the American economy." Our input on trade, taxes, health care and other issues shape the way our representatives create and implement policy that affects the structural building components industry. If you missed the 2004 Legislative Conference, consider implementing some of the ideas below to facilitate effective communication with your elected officials. Get involved today!

WRITE LETTERS

Letters are an effective and persuasive form of communicating our views. Since September 11, letters to the United States Congress or other government agencies that are mailed are typically delayed up to one month due to the screening process now used to ward off terrorist letter attacks. Sending letters via fax or email guarantees your message will be received in a timely manner.

Use these tips to create a persuasive letter:

- Keep it short by limiting your letter to one page and one issue.
- In the first paragraph identify yourself, the company you own or represent [name, city and state, zip code, type of components manufactured, and number of employees], and the issue you are writing about. If you are referring to a specific federal bill, identify it by number (e.g., H.R. 57 or S. 545).
- Choose the three strongest points to support your argument and develop them clearly. Too much information can distract from your position.
- Make it personal. Tell your legislator why the issue matters to you and how it affects you, your family, your business (e.g., employment) and your community.
- Make a connection to the legislator. Did you vote for him/her? Did you contribute to the campaign?
- Ask for a reply.
- Be polite, but take a firm position in your letter. Be confident in your understanding of the issue and remember that the legislator may know less than you about a specific topic.
- Thank elected officials when they vote the way you want.

EDITORIALS

Letters to the editor are one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper and reach a large audience. They allow community members to comment on the way issues are being addressed in the media and influence what topics the local paper covers. Elected officials often monitor this section of the newspaper and take notice of constituents' opinions.

Due to strict space limitations in newspapers, not all letters will be published, but the more letters the newspaper receives on a certain topic, the more likely they are to run at least one letter on the topic. Check the letter guidelines in your local paper and use these tips to write an effective letter to the editor:

- Keep it short and focused. Many newspapers have strict length limits and edit letters for space. A concise, single-issue letter has a better chance of retaining its salient points and keeping the reader's interest.
- Make specific references. While some newspapers will print general commentary letters, most prefer letters that respond to a specific article.
- Be factual and highlight aspects of the issue that haven't been previously addressed.
- Include your contact information. Many newspapers will only publish a letter to the editor after verifying the author's contact information. When printed, the letter will usually only include your name and city.
- Type your letter and sign it.
- Send letters to smaller newspapers. Small newspapers are more likely to print your letter and the letter can then spark local community action.

OFFICE VISITS

A visit to a legislator's office is perhaps the best way to present your view on a certain issue. Because they are often in the public eye, many elected officials respond best to this type of interaction. If you are comfortable with a face-to-face meeting, consider scheduling an office visit to discuss your concerns. Here are some tips for a successful visit:

- Make an appointment. Call their office to set up an appointment by asking for their scheduler. Note that some offices may require a formal submission prior to scheduling.
- Meet with staff. Do not be disappointed if you do not meet with your legislator, as they are extremely busy and rely heavily on staffers. Therefore, it is important that you take the meeting with staff seriously to ensure you build a positive relationship with them.
- Do your homework. Try to gain as much information on their position and yours prior to your visit.
- Be prompt. Show up for your appointment at least five minutes early.
- Introduce yourself. Give your name, address (city), company name you represent or own, and your affiliation (if any) with WTCA.
- Avoid acronyms. All of us know WTCA by its call letters, but WTCA to a legislator means very little. The Wood Truss Council of America, however, at least identifies a market segment within the U.S.
- Be responsive. Answer every question and be honest.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." If you do not know an answer to a question, don't "bluff." Follow up with an email or fax within a few days with the answer.

- Be polite. Remember that first impressions are lasting.
- Be brief. Get the facts out quickly and precisely.
- Ask for a response. Don't be discouraged if you do not get one right away and be persistent. The answer you get may not be the one you want, but you will get an answer.
- Thank them for the visit. No matter what the outcome of the meeting is, thank them for their time and valuable perspective. Open the door for future conversations by leaving your business card and personal phone numbers.
- Send a thank you. Send a thank you letter a few days after your visit that restates your position or request, and answers any questions from the meeting.

PLANT TOURS

Although phone calls, letters, office visits and other forms of communication are important, there is no better way to educate policy makers on what goes on in the structural building components world than a plant tour. By inviting your elected official and staff to tour your plant, you are providing them with valuable information. This is an ideal opportunity to showcase your company. A plant tour will give the legislator and/or their staff a first-hand opportunity to see how a company and employees may be affected by pending legislation. This is information that may even change their position on an issue that affects your ability to grow and provide jobs for their constituents. Keep these tips in mind when planning a tour:

- **Set a date: Be flexible.**
 - When setting up a date, it is best to offer several suggestions and if your choices are still inconvenient, ask the scheduler to offer a date.
 - Don't be discouraged if you get turned down with your initial request. Be persistent. Your elected officials receive many requests.
 - A good time to have a plant tour is during an election year so that the candidate can learn about the industry and solicit votes from your employees.
 - Invite all elected officials.
 - Don't just stay with certain political party affiliations. The goal is to develop a working relationship with all elected officials who may influence the future of your company or the industry.
- **Announce the date.**
 - Once you have established a date, contact your local media outlets with a press advisory.
 - Inform all employees by posting a sign or including a note in their paycheck.
- **Prepare the plant.**
 - Prepare your plant for the tour by marking hazardous areas and making sure your housekeeping is complete.
 - Be sure your guests have proper directions and know which entrance to use.
 - Appoint someone to greet your guests.
- **Display literature.**
 - Proudly display your company catalogs and any other type of promotional pieces.

- **Develop talking points.**
 - Describe the products you manufacture and how they are sold.
 - Show machinery in action.
 - Share success stories and the history of your facility.
 - Discuss the number of people employed at your plant and the types of employee programs you offer.
 - Discuss payroll and employee benefits as well as any additional incentives offered.
 - Offer the amount of taxes your business pays to federal, state and local governments.
 - Communicate any additional information regarding community events or sponsorship that you are involved with.

- **Take lots of pictures.**

VOLUNTEER ON POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Political campaigns are the means of survival for any elected official and volunteers are the root of any campaign. To volunteer for a campaign, call the campaign headquarters and offer your services and be specific about what you want to do. Volunteers are needed to coordinate activities, man phone banks, walk parades, canvas neighborhoods with literature, carry out fundraising events, and most importantly, promote get-out-the-vote efforts.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

There is one final—and highly significant—thing to remember about making your opinions and concerns known to elected officials. We are all human: we have families to feed, businesses to protect, products to sell and employees to pay. Legislators understand this and respect us for it. They care about the issues facing our industry, but there's only one way they'll hear about them. It starts with your voice.

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