



Adventures in Advocacy

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It's All About Who Ya Know!

by Sean D. Shields

Relationships. We all have them. With our families, with our friends, with our coworkers—they are a natural extension of our social nature. In addition, except for cousin Jim, they all make our lives just a little easier. We don't have to go through each day all alone, trying to figure out every little thing just to get by.

We also have similar personal relationships that are one step removed from our daily lives. Our insurance agent, our plumber, and that guy we really can trust with our car—we don't interact with these people every day, and we wouldn't usually consider getting them a gift for their birthday, but we have come to rely on them to do the things we don't have time or the knowledge to accomplish.

It's much the same in your professional life. Your lumber supplier, your plate supplier rep, that guy who can help you get OSHA off your back...wait, you don't know someone who can stop those bureaucrats from breathing down your neck? How about someone who can help find grants to pay for retraining your employees on new technology or production techniques? No? Well, you must have someone you go to when you want to quickly get to the bottom of a workers' compensation claim, right? Still no??

Then the problem is you haven't established one of your most important relationships—the one with your Congressperson's office. As you may know, the industry has been working through its membership since 2001 during the annual **SBC** Legislative Conference to build these relationships. Each year, attendance at the conference has grown, and our industry has begun to form very strong relationships with some key members of Congress.

However, if traveling to Washington, DC in May isn't possible, you can also participate in a new effort by WTCA called Congressional District Meetings. Each lawmaker has local offices back in their home districts, and during Congressional breaks, your federal lawmakers return home to meet with their constituents. These are perfect opportunities for you to establish relationships with your lawmakers just by hoping in your car and driving across town.

For example, recently Glenn McClendon of Sun State Components and Mike Murray of A.C. Houston Lumber attended meetings with their U.S. Senators from Nevada, John Ensign (R) and Harry Reid (D). Mike had never visited with a member of Congress before, afterward he said, "I felt really good about these meetings. I felt we were able to establish a good relationship with them, they were very accessible. I also learned which methods to use to make sure our views are heard in the future."

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—Mike Murray, A.C. Houston Lumber, after his first district meeting

WTCA staff scheduled the meeting on their behalf and prepared a list of issues to discuss ahead of time. These "talking points" covered immigration reform, regulatory costs on small business and a trade law known as the Byrd Amendment. These issues are being debated heatedly in the halls of Congress this year, and giving our industry's viewpoint on them is an important effort not to be overlooked. As Glenn pointed out, "They were well informed on all the issues, particularly immigration. Everyone agreed that immigration reform needs to happen, and they were in favor of a guest worker program. These were really effective meetings."

The reality is, however, that the talking points are really an ice breaker to generate discussion on topics they're familiar with. The real purpose of the meeting is to establish a relationship with either the lawmaker or a member of their staff. By bringing good information and a strong perspective on how these issues affect your company, you establish a reputation they can trust and are willing to respond to in the future—regardless of the issue.

Herb Hildebrand from Casmin in Florida attended a Congressional District Meeting with a staff member of his Senator, Mel Martinez (R). Herb had also never met with his lawmaker before. After the meeting, he said, "I could see the light bulb go off as I shared how these issues affected our company. I felt confident that the staff person would share my message with the Senator." More importantly, Herb added, "I felt I was able to make a good connection with the people we met with and if I called them, they'd take my call. This was very valuable from a networking perspective."

Time is precious, and when things are busy there's never enough of it. However, it is possible to more than make up for the time it takes to attend a few meetings 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. If Glenn could sum up his experiences during his two meetings, "it was well worth the effort!" **SBC**

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