

Bringing It All Back Home

The power of in-district legislative meetings for your association

By Richard May

A funny thing happened on our way to Congress. We never got there.

Instead of hosting our traditional legislative fly-in this year, we created an organized "In-Store Legislative Conference." A campaign for our association members to invite their members of Congress to their retail rent-to-own stores to meet with them, take a tour of the store, and talk to employees and customers.

As with any new idea, there was skepticism from our board of directors and others until we tried it ourselves.

APRO is the national trade association for the rent-to-own industry. We are located in Austin, TX and have been advocating varying legislative initiatives on Capitol Hill for 35 years. As a part of the advocacy effort, we have held an annual legislative conference in D.C. for the past 25 years where APRO members travel to meet with their House and Senate

members in their legislative offices, something you may do on a national or state scale at your own association.

We moved the date of the election year conference to September. However, being in D.C. in September during one of the craziest election years in decades, we knew members of Congress and staff would be distracted and disengaged.

And would members of Congress be there? In such an unpredictable election year, their focus is on their district convincing voters to re-elect them and avoid the backlash of frustrated voters. As Rep. Michael McCaul told us, it used to be a benefit to be the incumbent but now he wonders if it is the opposite. So what do we do?



Left to right: Shelley Martinek, CMP; Cindy Ferguson, CEM, CMP; Bill Keese, CAE; Rep. Michael McCaul; Tulisha Carson; and Richard May.



Rep. Lamar Smith (left) visiting with APRO Executive Director Bill Keese.

MEET WITH ELECTED OFFICIAL ON YOUR TURF—ADDING VALUE TO YOUR ASSOCIATION

That's when the idea of an organized "In-District Legislative Conference" came up that went one step further to an "In-Store Legislative Conference" where APRO members invite their elected officials to their stores. We've had elected officials visit rent-to-own stores through the years and every time the impression has been profound in further support for the industry and legislative initiatives.

But, still, there was much worry and doubt from APRO board and members. The thinking was that members of Congress would not take the time to visit a store. It's plausible for APRO members to meet their elected officials at their district offices but highly doubtful they would visit a store. We, at APRO, know store visits can be done but how can we convince our membership to take the jump?

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

We decided rather than telling them what to do, we would show them. In our office, three of the five members of Congress that represent parts of Austin either represent the APRO office's district or staff's personal district so we started there.

Congress has specific district work weeks we pinpointed. Within two weeks, we had confirmations with Representatives Lamar Smith and Michael McCaul to visit our office. The confirmation of the visits didn't happen immediately. It took several phone calls, then repeat phone calls. But a good tactic was to go through their campaign offices rather than legislative as the campaign staff's job is to promote their boss while the legislative office tends to protect them.

Another successful strategy was to study their relationship with our APRO members and their history with our legislative initiatives. And, the most

Representatives Michael McCaul and Lamar Smith are both senior members and each chair powerful committees. APRO has very few or no APRO members in their districts so we fill a very important void. If any issues that come up affecting our members and we need access to communicate with them, we have already established the relationship.

What if that member becomes the key to your association's advocacy issue and you're the only one who has the ability to get a sincere audience? All of sudden you, the trade association and trade association staff, have become a great value to your board and membership.

Developing a personal relationship with your elected official also increases your stock in the trade association profession. If you move onto another trade association, you carry that relationship with you. Since you built that relationship as a person and a constituent rather than as a trade association executive, your elected official will always see you that way.

Your value is that you are a voting constituent which means your family and neighbors are constituents. That's what is most important to the elected official. If you as the constituent needed help regarding the widget association prior but now need help in the thing-a-majig association, it doesn't matter to the elected official, it's the fact that you're their constituent and will listen to you no matter what trade association employs you.

So if you have close relationships with your representative and senators on a personal basis and can contact them at any time for any reason, that gives you significant value to any employer or board of directors.

important, is the constituent connection. Rep. Smith represents the APRO office and executive director and Rep. McCaul is my personal Congressman. Both have co-sponsored legislation that APRO members supported so the invite was presented as a meet, greet and "thank you" from APRO staff and their constituents.

The next strategy was to make sure they were here to meet the APRO trade association staff. To let them know the rent-to-own trade association was in their district or the APRO employees lived and voted in the district. When they visited we talked to them about APRO as a trade association and each staff member was able to introduce themselves and their role at APRO and working in the trade association profession.

We knew a natural by-product would be discussing the legislative issues. And, those issues came up organically so the discussions regarding the issues rent-to-own faces in the legislature became organic rather than forced.

Another great "light bulb" moment was that being in our APRO office in a relaxed environment, we got to know each other as people and not just constituent to elected official. Rep. Smith recently became a grandfather and had been collecting coins for the past five years to save for his future grandkids. (Unbeknownst to his daughter as a sidenote.) That touched off a warm conversation with the three APRO grandparents relating to his experience.

Rep. McCaul told us about his experience with his triplets

10 TIPS FOR SETTING UP A SUCCESSFUL IN-DISTRICT LEGISLATIVE MEETING

1. Make it a priority for your members to have their elected officials visit them at their place of business. Not the member's district office.
2. Use the meeting to introduce them to your profession, the employees/colleagues, vendors, customers, etc. Whatever audience that has the most stake in your profession.
3. Keep it as an informal meet and greet and educate meeting. So many times, meetings at the Capitol means you have to quickly explain your profession and then the legislative issues so the meeting can become rushed with a potentially muddled or confusing message. Keep this visit simple. And, in our instance, the legislative issues were brought up organically and we ended up achieving both objectives.
4. Use basic guest hosting tips. Fresh coffee, bottled water and light snacks. BUT, make sure the snacks are fresh from a small business in their district. We made sure to get scones, muffins and pastries from a locally owned bakery in their district that was made that morning. They like hearing the meeting was also supporting a small business they represent.
5. Be respectfully persistent. You cannot send one e-mail and expect the next week for the elected official to be in your office. It takes time and follow through. Sometimes it takes a lot of time. One of our APRO members spent three months before they had that member of Congress in their store.
6. Make sure to take good photos and promote them to the membership and let the elected official know that. They like to know their picture and name will be sent to thousands of people.
7. Make sure to have name badges on so the elected officials can put the face with a name.
8. To identify the constituents and give them the due attention with the elected official.
9. Do your homework. Find out the interests and local connections you have with your elected officials. They live in your area so will have multiple touch points that you can talk about on a personal level. This is basically a meeting of neighbors getting together to talk about what you do in the neighborhood.
10. Be respectful of their time. In one of our visits the Congressman stayed for 40 minutes, in the other 20 minutes, but objectives were met on both counts and we made sure we did not overstay their visit so to speak.

having to be rushed to NICU after being born. That story happened because he already knew about my first stillborn daughter and the second one having to be rushed to NICU. We had a personal bond through our mutual experiences. Those conversations broke down the formal barriers and turned the experience into a personal connection rather than a

'what are you going to do for me' meeting.

But, the biggest enlightenment came from the Representatives themselves. And, both said the same thing independently. We told them we are coordinating and in-store legislative conference where APRO members are to invite their Congressmembers to their stores for a personal visit. As such, we invited them to

our "store"—the APRO office—for a meet and greet and to educate them on what APRO does.

Both said that was a great idea and hadn't heard of any other trade association doing the same thing as far as inviting them to their place of business. They said being at the APRO office was great because they didn't have the pending vote looming over them at their DC offices always distracting them. They had the time and environment to listen thoughtfully.

They both said it was nice to get out of their office and meet with their constituents on the constituents' turf. They said they sometimes feel too trapped in their DC office, district office or stuffy hotel room for a fundraiser. They both said it was a refreshing, mindful visit that didn't have the pressure of a stump speech or legislative commitment. It was a nice relaxed visit with their constituents they represent and was able to find out who they are as people they represent.

They learned something new about their district. They learned what APRO is and does. They learned more about the trade association profession and the people they represent. And, guess what, they also went away knowing what is important to the rent-to-own industry legislatively. But they walked away knowing the rent-to-own legislative issues with much more of a memorable impression than a position paper and statistical charts.

With the success in our office, we were able to demonstrate the viability of this tactic to our board and members and provide them with a template for executing the same meeting at their stores with their representative. ●

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