

CEO UPDATE

Amy's advice and insights regarding grassroots Key Contact development were featured in [CEO Update](#). Find out why it's a vital component of an influential advocacy program, and the one thing you need to do to insure Key Contact effectiveness.

Who you know: Finding, growing key contacts for grassroots advocacy

By William Ehart, for CEOUpdate.com

Effective lobbying is about personal relationships: the more personal the better.

It's one thing for a professional lobbyist to build trust with a member of Congress or a state legislator. It's quite another if the tie that binds goes back to a fraternity, church, or even a relationship by marriage.

Among the 1.3 million members of the National Association of Realtors, there are many with such relationships, and NAR identifies the best of them through its Key Contacts program.

"We have one Realtor for every member of Congress, so there's 535 key contacts," said Jim MacGregor, NAR director of advocacy communications and mobilization. "Almost all of them have a personal relationship: They sold their house, worked on their first campaigns, were college roommates, are in-laws, cousins, uncles, it doesn't matter. There's some sort of personal connection there."

The keys to such an effective grassroots operation include constant recruitment and vetting, extensive training, and year-round engagement.

Knowledge of the personal connections typically bubbles up from the local level for organizations with state and local affiliates like the NAR and National Corn Growers Association. But cutting-edge technology can help maintain effectiveness and keep the connections top of mind depending on the issue at hand. A constantly updated database is essential.

Where's your data?

"We've been very disciplined about keeping our database," said Sharon McBride, senior director of external affairs and policy programs at eBay.

McBride presented on the topic at an Advocacy Leaders Network event at Beekeeper Group this summer. She has built eBay's program from scratch, and has at least one member of its Small Business Ambassador program in every congressional district.

Her grassroots team is present at major eBay seller confabs, introducing themselves and encouraging participation in the program.

“So anytime something comes up, as it often does, at the state level, we can rally and say, ‘Oh, yes, I’ve got a seller in Texas who sells electronics, and that regulation would be harmful to him or her,’” McBride told CEO Update.

“We can say who’s interested in cross border trade, who’s interested in internet sales tax, privacy issues, or whatever the case may be. We have a stable of people that we can activate,” she said.

MacGregor from NAR said the database needs updating as members of Congress change or as Realtors lose interest in maintaining the relationships—or are not doing so effectively.

While local Realtor boards know who knows whom, candidates are vetted through the state level and the national group has final say in who is part of the program.

It’s not just about personal relationships though. Associations need to identify their most effective advocates. RAP Index is one of a number of vendors that help groups do just that.

“You will find people who have relationships, but are not necessarily willing to use them,” RAP Index founder Chip Felkel said. “Conversely, you will find people who maybe don’t have a lot of relationships, but are really comfortable engaging.”

Felkel’s firm scores potential grassroots advocates, based on a five- to seven-minute survey, on three attributes: relationships, ability and willingness as advocates, and political capital. The data is kept for each client in the cloud, reducing the risk it gets forgotten in some spreadsheet somewhere, he said.

But the personal touch still is key, especially as email campaigns have become increasingly less effective.

“One phone call from a guy that lives across the street from the congressman is going to be a lot more effective than 400 emails from people nobody knows,” said Felkel.

Keep it friendly

Advocates need to be engaged year-round so they are not called out of the blue with a request to contact a politician. But MacGregor and Amy Showalter of The Showalter Group, a PAC and grassroots consultancy, said the advocates have to be tapped judiciously.

“People are not going to want to engage their relationship on behalf of the organization 100% of the time,” Showalter said. “And that’s OK, we have to remember it’s their relationship. It’s a privilege to have these people on your team, not a right.”

NAR encourages its 535 key contacts to engage their member of Congress at least quarterly, and has an online form for them to report back. But just having coffee is OK.

One NAR member is longtime friends with a congressman, and they have coffee together every weekend.

“If he’s having coffee with him 50 times a year, one out of 50 times we might talk shop,” MacGregor said. “The rest of the time, they’re doing what they’ve always done, talking about their families, the housing market in Washington and just having a normal friendship. But for those very few times where we need to get a message across, we have that ability to do it.”

Belly of the beast

Training is critical to success, said Steve Uram, manager of grassroots advocacy and leadership at NCGA. The group keeps tabs on which members have personal relationships with members of Congress, but generally draws advocates from the ranks of those active with state corn grower associations.

Such farmers are brought to the belly of the beast—in Washington, D.C.—and introduced to its denizens, from lobbying firm “hired guns” to junior Hill staffers over two to three days.

“We kind of peel back the onion for our growers,” Uram said.

Katharine Emerson, director of public policy and political strategy, leads some of the training. “We’ll have different panels of congressional staffers come in, someone from a committee, a scheduler, a chief of staff and they’ll talk through their different roles,” Emerson said.

“We’ll also do panels with different types of lobbyists. What does it look like to be a hired gun? What does it look like to be an in-house lobbyist for a corporation versus an association lobbyist?” she said.

“The key is training, training, training,” said Showalter. “Our research shows that the more time training your advocates, the more successful legislatively you are.”