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Persuade legislators with the personal touch

by *Paula Mohr*

If you want to persuade someone to take your side on an issue, you still have to do it the old-fashioned way. You must meet face to face and maintain personal contact.

"In an effective grass-roots campaign, eyeball-to-eyeball contact comes first," says Amy Showalter, a national grass-roots consultant, based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Follow-up letters and phone calls naturally fall in place after an initial contact.

To be effective in lobbying for the dairy industry in general or your business in particular, Showalter offers these suggestions:

- Be willing to do what the competition is unwilling to do. "This is not for the faint of heart," she says. "The race goes to the most organized."
- Keep in touch with legislators all year, even when you're not asking for anything. Frequent contact shows that you are more than a one-issue squeaky wheel.
- Know your legislators and lobbyists. Familiarize yourself with their work histories, their biographies, the committees they serve on, whether they have family, and so on.

"Family and life experiences influence their world view," Showalter says. Use this knowledge when tailoring persuasive messages for them.

- Attend legislative events to show your support for your legislators and lobbyists.
- Write letters of support for your legislators and lobbyists to newspapers and send them copies of the letters.
- Invite legislators and lobbyists to speak to community groups.
- Take legislators and lobbyists on tours of dairy farms—yours and other producers'—to show them what really happens on dairy operations. Take photographs of them on the tours and send them copies. "Legislators love pictures," Showalter says.
- Write thank-you notes to legislators and lobbyists for working on a bill whether it passes or not.
- Write notes of encouragement when a legislator is under fire.
- Send a congratulatory letter when a legislator is elected to office. Tell him or her that you'd be willing to serve as an informal dairy adviser, and include your contact information.
- Attend the annual lobbying day at your state capitol.

- Clip and mail articles of legislators to them, especially when the articles do not discuss your issues.
- Volunteer to work on campaigns. "The most influential person to a legislator is a family member, followed second by a personal friend, and third, by a campaign worker," Showalter says.
- Write a personal endorsement letter. "This is my favorite thing to do," Showalter says. "Write down why you're voting for this person and why others should, too. The bottom line is that to get what you want, you have to help legislators get what they want, and they want to get elected."

Is your campaign making progress?

How do you know if your grass-roots involvement is making progress in the political arena? National grass-roots consultant Amy Showalter offers these checkpoints:

- You will win more issues.
- You will attain greater vote margins.
- You will get better questions from the media.
- Legislators will be more aware of issues.
- You will see more co-sponsors on legislation.

"The ultimate test is when a legislator comes to you first before signing onto a bill and asks you what you think," Showalter says. "The trust level is so high. This does happen. This is the apex of where we want to be."