

Politics is Personal

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

- Amendment 1, U.S. Constitution

As the First Amendment to the Constitution makes clear – and perhaps surprisingly so – not only did our Founding Fathers believe strongly in freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press, they also understood how essential it is for people in a free society to have the right to “petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Now in all candor, I’m sure the framers of our Constitution weren’t thinking of the Florida Engineering Society (FES) when they drafted the First Amendment, but that doesn’t mean it applies any less to FES than to any other group or individual in this country.

However, right about now someone who has just read this first paragraph is thinking... SO WHAT? Well, I believe that not only do we have a Constitutional **right** to petition the government, but also from a business perspective we have an absolute **responsibility** to do so! As noted business guru Peter Drucker makes plain in the following quote, we all need to be about “creating change.” And that’s what lobbying is all about.

“The talk you hear about **capturing to change** is not only **stupid** it’s **dangerous**. The only way you can manage **change** is to **create** it.”

-Peter Drucker

The good news is that you can become involved in the political process without becoming a “big-time” lobbyist. You and your

organization can provide a wealth of information on how legislative initiatives affect your industry at both the state and national levels. You can and should help legislators do their jobs by pointing out how their proposals would impact you, your family, your business, and your area.

But, before you jump into the “political pool,” there are four basic ideas I need to communicate. After all, as the African Proverb warns, “only a fool tests the depth of the water with both feet.”

POLITICS IS NOT SCIENTIFIC

“In theory there should be no difference between theory & practice. In practice there is!”

-Yogi Berra

Today a great many colleges and universities offer degrees in Political Science. In fact, I myself hold a degree in Political Science from Florida Atlantic University. Unfortunately, in reality there is little or nothing scientific about politics. Oh sure, there have been attempts at applying scientific principles or theories to political activities, and the art of polling has progressed tremendously. But political scientists today have as much ability to predict with certainty the outcome of next year’s election as economists do predicting the Dow Jones Industrial average a month from now or meteorologists do predicting next Tuesday’s weather. The point is that in truth, politics is actually much closer to an intuitive

art form than a legitimate scientific process.

While this may sound elementary, it is vitally important for any individual or group – especially organizations steeped in the hard science of engineering – to recognize that you can’t “engineer” answers to “political” questions. In the engineering world, $2 + 2$ will equal 4 every time, however, the same cannot be said for the political world.

ALL POLITICS IS PERSONAL

“If you want to get across an idea, wrap it up in a person.”

-Ralph Bunche

Former House Speaker Tip O’Neil was fond of the maxim that “all politics is local.” My “Callaway’s corollary” to O’Neil’s maxim is that “all politics is personal.” Simply put, absent a relationship with your legislator(s) and, specifically their staff, you won’t get very far in Tallahassee or Washington, DC.

In the movie “You’ve Got Mail,” Meg Ryan’s character seeks e-mail advice from Tom Hanks’ character... without knowing that it is his large mega-bookstore chain that is threatening the survival of her small, local bookstore. Hanks’ reply was that it’s not personal; it’s business. But it became pretty personal to Meg Ryan’s character when she had to close her business! Someone once said that a recession is when your neighbor loses his job... but a depression is when you lose yours.

Just as in business, all politics is personal. Your ultimate goal is to have legislators and their staff soliciting your views on issues important to your industry.

YA GOTTA BE THERE

“The absent are always wrong.” -Machiavelli

To establish a solid reputation with your legislator(s) and their staff, either in Tallahassee or in Washington, DC, you’ll need to follow the model employed by the famous major league baseball player (and future Hall of Famer) Cal Ripken.

What was Cal Ripken famous for? Most home runs? Most golden gloves? Highest batting average? Most stolen bases? No, Ripken became famous for playing in the



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most consecutive games. Basically, Cal showed up for work every day—he “was there”! Being there means taking the time to develop a relationship – either directly or through FES – with the appropriate folks in Tallahassee and DC.

To be a Ripken-like “player,” ya gotta be there, and here are three tips to help:

- **Prepare:** As in business, preparation is a key ingredient to success in the political arena. Yet, in dealing with complex engineering issues, it is sometimes easy to become a bit too organized and overly prepared. Sometimes a condition I call the “Jell-O Syndrome” can exist, that will hamper the effectiveness of an advocacy effort. The Jell-O Syndrome is where motion is mistaken for progress. As the actor Michael J. Fox once remarked, “I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence I can reach for; perfection is God’s business.”
- **Show Up:** Don’t allow the pursuit of the “perfect,” but untimely – answer or information prevent you from providing folks in Tallahassee or Washington, DC with a good answer that’s on time! If Ripken had not been on the field, it would have been impossible for him to contribute to the success of his team. Likewise, if you, or your organization are not “in the game,” then you’ll never have the chance to “make the plays” that will mean the difference between winning and losing. Like Woody Allen has said, “fifty percent of life is just showin’ up.”
- **Perform:** Like an All-Star shortstop, your reputation and that of your organization will be largely made by how you perform ... or basically, how you react. Quite frankly, in politics as in life, it is sometimes easier to “act” the right way than to “react” in the proper manner. But again, like Cal Ripken, once you’ve prepared and shown up, simply do what you know how to do and the result usually takes care of itself. As Oprah Winfrey has said, “luck is a matter of preparation meeting opportunity.”

FACTS ARE NICE, BUT SLOGANS SELL BEER

“As the old philosopher once said, facts are nice but slogans sell beer”

–John Ehrlichman

Since most legislators, and practically all their staffers, are not engineering professionals, a major task will be to translate the needs of your group from “engineer-ese” into “legislative-ese.” The best way to do this is to ask yourself three basic questions about any issue:

- 1) Why is this issue important to me?
- 2) Why should this legislator care about it?
- 3) What exactly do I want this member to do about it?

If you can’t answer these questions in a clear, concise, and non-technical way, the odds are slim that you will be successful in communicating with your target audience.

While the “facts” (big thick reports) certainly have their place, what often separates just a good proposal from a successful one is the slogan or marketing that goes along with it. During the Civil War, Edward Everett – a clergyman, president of Harvard University and orator of national renown – was asked to give the keynote address at the ceremony dedicating the cemetery at Gettysburg. President Abraham Lincoln was invited to “give a few remarks.” Everett spoke for two hours, and today nobody remembers what he said. Lincoln talked for two minutes and his words will never be forgotten.

It is also essential to communicate your position with passion, as well as purpose. If you don’t act like you care about an issue, why should the legislators or their staff? As Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”

So remember:

- Politics Is NOT Scientific
- All Politics Is Personal
- Ya Gotta Be There, and
- Facts Are Nice, But Slogans Sell Beer

Now go get ‘em! And as you do, remember the immortal words of former Florida Governor Reubin Askew... “always be sincere whether you mean it or not.” ■



Doug Callaway

About the Author: Doug Callaway is President of Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT), a statewide business and transportation association. He started as FBT President in January 2003.

Before agreeing to become President of FBT, Callaway was a transportation program manager with Carter & Burgess, Inc, in Fort Worth, Texas. While there he authored a “how to” guide on being a Transportation Advocate in Washington, and a timely article on the reauthorization of the federal surface transportation law known as TEA-21. Both items can be found online at FBT’s Web site: www.bettertransportation.org.

In January 2001, Callaway was named to the Transportation Advisory Committee for the transition effort of President George W. Bush. Callaway has been a guest speaker at the US Air Force Academy, and before audiences from the Transportation Construction Coalition in Washington, DC, the San Antonio Mobility Coalition, and numerous national & regional associations of state highway & transportation officials -- AASHTO, SASHTO and WASHTO.

Prior to joining Carter & Burgess, Callaway served as the Federal Programs Coordinator for the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) for 12 years, where he established a national reputation as a leader on federal transportation issues for both Florida and other so-called “donor states.” During his tenure with FDOT as the federal legislative “point man,” Florida’s level of federal transportation funding increased from \$445 million annually to over \$1.3 BILLION.

In the 1980s, Callaway was a Legislative Director for former Florida Congressman Tom Lewis (R-North Palm Beach) on Capitol Hill, and Organizational Director for Florida Congressman Clay Shaw’s (R-Ft. Lauderdale) 1982 Re-election Campaign.