

Get Involved in the Legislative Process

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The Minnesota Lodging Association, in conjunction with the Minnesota Restaurant Association, like many other state associations across the United States hosts an annual event called Hospitality Day at the Capitol. The American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA) has a similar event in Washington, DC called the Legislative Action Summit (LAS). (To learn when the next LAS is visit AHLA.com.) The recent mid-term elections prompted me to reflect back about how my interest in being more active in the political process evolved. Some people define "active in the political process" as voting in major elections while others define it as being a politician or a lobbyist.

A majority of the people I know fall in the first category every four years and occasionally every two years, if they are really dedicated. Really interested voters may even read the headlines and first paragraph of news articles about the current big issues like minimum wage, congressional ethics, the fallout from the recent election, not to mention the war on terror around the world. Not enough people in our industry, particularly at the hotel operations level, fall into a third category: those that are aware of the issues and make the effort to express their opinions to their representatives or give guidance to sympathetic lobbyists by being involved with industry associations.

Influence of the Individual

The most influential group among us may be individual citizens who simply contact their elected representatives at any level of government.

It doesn't take much effort to vote occasionally and the result is that you and many others have elevated someone to the highest office and responsibility they have ever had. The question arises as to whom is going to keep this elected person's feet grounded in reality? They have to hear from us.

This leads me back to Hospitality Day at the Capitol and the Legislative Action Summit. Several years ago I was asked to speak about sharing my views with legislators. I realized many years ago that writing my state and national representatives about my opinions was not only acceptable but my responsibility. I encourage everyone to do at least that. If you can participate in a more active and personal way, that would have even more of an impact. Believe me, they want to hear from us. They certainly aren't experts on all issues and they are keenly aware of their need for guidance from knowledgeable people.

Legislators really appreciate hearing from hoteliers and others that provide insights and assistance that helps them determine public policy. They understand that each hotelier employs several of their constituents. They know that by working with you, they are also communicating with many others that they represent.

Most people don't write to their elected representatives. This is what makes those letters they do receive so important – legislators realize that each letter represents hundreds of their constituents' views. Another powerful tool is to write letters to the editor of your local paper. Elected representatives read papers just like you and I. However, they tend to read the letters to the editor of their local paper before anything else because they understand that it is their constituents' opinions that are written there and that each letter reaches their entire district and may represent thousands of people.

Help from the Associations

If you are not sure what to say, simply write a draft letter and send it the Government Affairs department for your association at the state or national level as appropriate. They will be glad to comment on your letter, help

Summary

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you with accuracy and generally make sure you don't put your writing "foot" in your mouth. Even if you don't need their input, it is important that you send them a copy of your letter. This helps the government affairs department staff know what the various members of our industry feel and what comments the various legislators are receiving so they can follow up on them.

For me, the next step was calling legislators on the phone and visiting with them in person. I procrastinated for years out of fear that I was not going to present myself and my industry properly. For those who know me, it may be difficult to picture me afraid to talk to someone. Frankly, I had even visited several prominent national politicians, hosted them in my hotels and visited with former President Reagan and his wife alone over dessert many years ago. Trust me, it's not the same as letting your own representative know face-to-face what you believe and want.

My election to the position of treasurer of the Minnesota Hotel & Lodging Association many years ago prompted me to contact my legislators in person. I realized that if I was going to represent my peers in forums and legislative committees I had to learn to talk to legislators without being awed by their elected position. This served me well when I was elected as an officer of the AH&LA.

Visits a Natural Step

I convinced myself that visiting with a legislator was a natural step after writing to one. With encouragement from Tom Day and Tom Newcome, lobbyists for the Minnesota associations, I started writing to my state senators and representatives advising them that I would be calling to make appointments and to discuss issues. Note that I wrote them to tell them that I'd be calling. Writing first made the steps easier and it set an agenda for the subsequent meeting. I also made sure that Tom Day's schedule allowed him to accompany me so he could go on my first appointment with me. I was, to say the least, apprehensive.

I started with my local legislators but eventually needed to deal with a number of state legislators. Obviously there is a senator and a representative associated with the district where I live, where my office is, and where my hotels are. While the legislators representing one's district of residence are most interested in your views, those representing your business districts are also concerned about the impact of legislation on the business and its employees. Each of us usually has at least two senators and representatives that we should contact.

Before visiting with a legislator, at any level, be sure to know a little about the person and what issues they tend to be interested in pursuing and what side of you issues they may already have taken a position on. Also be familiar with how an issue affects your business and the others in the area. Both state and national elected officials value being updated about what is going on locally.

In addition to you making appointments to visit them, legislators appreciate your inviting them to visit you. Legislators often hold town hall meetings where they hear from their constituents in an open forum. Hotels with large meeting rooms are ideal locations for these events. In offering space for these, hoteliers develop a personal relationship with the legislators and their staffs. Tours of your hotels also provide a great opportunity to educate and develop a close relationship with your representatives. Most people, including legislators, only see the lobby and guestrooms of hotels. They do not understand what it takes to make a hotel run. A simple tour of your property can provide insights to the complexities of running your business, from tax depreciation issues affecting your equipment to immigration issues that allow you to provide the service they expect. Before long, they will be calling you for advice.

Hidden Issues

Issues before our legislators are both big and newsworthy or small, quiet and expensive. Sure, we're all aware of the minimum wage and various tax rates. But were you aware of the elevator inspection issue? Or how about the changing breakfast buffet sanitary requirements and fees or some similar national or state issue that will cost our industry money?

I happened to be sitting on a subcommittee hearing where a union associated with the electricians had their business manager, a unionized electrical contractor and lobbyist testify that elevators are never inspected after they are installed in Minnesota and that any one can work on them. Obviously, they felt that only licensed, union electricians who had gone through the traditional apprentice, journeyman, and master program should be allowed to work on elevators. No one mentioned that electricians don't know about hydraulics, emergency breaks and the mechanical safety devices on the doors! The legislators need to have this pointed out to them.

For that particular issue, no daily paper or television station reported this minor amendment. They only covered minimum wage, worker's compensation and the local utility's nuclear waste. Had I not attended the hearing, I would never have known about this important and potentially costly issue being decided by the representatives. If some minor amendments make it through the entire legislative process, costs and hassles will increase at many hotels without an offsetting benefit.

Certainly, I am not recommending that we all start attending legislative sub-committee meetings. At the national level and in most states we are lucky to have an excellent paid staff to monitor legislative and regulatory issues and a politically active membership. Through their Government Affairs and Legislative Committees, Grass Roots Network and Political Action Committees (PACs), the associations' positions on issues are brought to the attention of legislators throughout the various states and in Washington.

Association web sites are a good source of information on issues of interest to our industry. All branches of government and virtually every elected official have a web site as well.

PACs

PACs raise and disperse funds within the guidelines of law for use in funding some of our industry's efforts to bring our views to Congress and our legislatures. PAC fundraising functions at the state and national levels are also excellent opportunities to get together with your industry peers.

PAC is not a four letter word and contributing to a PAC is not a bad thing only done by the corporate titans and lobbyists. Contributing to the PAC of your choice in any amount, no matter how small, is simply exercising your right to free speech. It is another way to exercise your constitutional right to petition your government. One should seriously consider contributing to our industry's state PAC in your state and national PACs such as HotelPAC (AH&LA) or that of your company, if it sponsors one.

Grass Roots Networks

Many state lodging associations have a Grass Roots Network. The Grass Roots Network consists of a core group of volunteers from the association. These people serve as the base of a statewide telephone or email network (calling tree). The state is divided into zones made up of several legislative districts. In each of these there are volunteer zone captains who contact about five area managers who, in turn, contact at least five members who have volunteered to participate by contacting their legislators. This system generates hundreds of calls or emails to legislators throughout the state.

The Legislative Action Summit and Hospitality Day at the Capitol are a series of events while Congress or the state legislature is in session. Owners, management, staff and families from the industry come to Washington, DC or the state capitol. The sessions usually consist of legislative updates and an orientation to the current issues before the legislators which affect our industry. Usually several political leaders and consultants will speak to the group.

Before people head over to the legislative or congressional offices, the government affairs staff will refresh everyone's memory on proper etiquette for expressing one's views to a legislator. We're reminded not to threaten them with withholding our vote next election, not to exaggerate, and not to be awed by them.

After the meeting with their representatives people return to meet with their Grass Roots Network members from their zone to discuss their legislators' responses and to share their own positions on various items of legislation. Usually in the late afternoon or early evening the legislators and/or their staff members join the members for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres.

These events are a tremendously motivating civics class where members of the hospitality industry can participate in government in an encouraging and reassuring environment.

Everyone Benefits

Clearly everyone benefits from the AH&LA's and our various state associations' efforts in the legislative arena. Those who don't belong to the associations and as a result are not participating at any level in the governance of their state and our country shouldn't complain about what results from the legislative sessions because they did not volunteer to contribute to the process.

Those that participate at any level and especially those that volunteer to serve on the Government Affairs

Committees or Grass Roots Network or even just contribute to a PAC have a right to complain because they went a few steps beyond voting. I invite you to become a legitimate, licensed complainer by at least taking that first step of writing a letter.

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About Kirby D. Payne



Kirby D. Payne, CHA, President of HVS Hotel Management and HVS Asset Management - Newport, has over 40 years of hotel operations, consulting, and development experience. He was the 2002 Chair of the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA) and a former Director of the National Restaurant Association. He is a frequent speaker and author. His hotel experience began as a four-year-old living in a hotel on the Amazon River in Brazil, which was managed by his father for InterContinental Hotels. He never lived in a house until he was 13. Payne previously served on the Certification Commission of the AH&LA's Educational Institute. HVS Hotel Management has operated hotels throughout the United States and has served a multiplicity of clients, including lenders, airports and other government entities, and individual investors. HVS Asset Management - Newport oversees upscale and luxury hotels on behalf of clients who use branded management and major independent management companies. Both companies undertake various consulting assignments including, but not limited to, development consulting, brand and management company selections and contract negotiations, Hotel Performance Analysis and litigation support (expert witness). Mr. Payne is frequently appointed as a Receiver for hotels and resorts. Contact Kirby at +1 (401) 625-5016 or [\[email protected\]](#).