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Stand up for your industry



by MARIA ZAMPINI

The next time
a legislative alert
comes across your desk,
I encourage you to spend
the five, 10 or 15 minutes
it will take to write, call
or e-mail your legislators.
Numbers matter.

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As you likely know, the 1st Amendment of our Constitution grants us freedom of religion, press and expression. This amendment assures us, among other things, freedom of speech, press and to peaceably assemble. This winter, headlines have been dominated by the collective bargaining rallies in Wisconsin and other states across the country. As well, we've seen turmoil and unrest throughout the Middle East. These events enforce to me just how lucky I am to live in America, how grateful I am to our forefathers for their vision when establishing this great country, and it reminds me that each of us should not take for granted the rights we have to openly express our opinions.

On February 22, I was among 100 or so participants at the Green Industry Advocacy Day in Columbus, Ohio. Organized by the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association, this biennial event was unique compared to previous Advocacy days. For the first time, the ONLA brought together 10 green industry organizations in one room, at one time, to unite as one voice for the benefit of Ohio's green industry. Kudos to ONLA, Belinda Jones of Capitol Consulting and their partners: Ohio Landscape Association; Ohio Lawn Care Association; Nursery Growers of Lake County, Ohio; Ohio Turfgrass Foundation; Ohio Professional Applicators for Responsible Regulation; and the Central, Miami Valley, Northern and Northwestern Ohio Golf Course Superintendents Associations.

As the lot of us proceeded to the capitol, we had to wade through a throng of people who had gathered to protest Ohio Senate Bill 5 on collective bargaining. Protestors were urged to come dressed in red. We were there to lobby our own concerns, so we kind of stuck out like a sore thumb and unfortunately got—for lack of better words—the evil eye from several in the crowd. I even got yelled at repeatedly from one gentleman, “Are you for or against the bill?” Honestly, it was a little bit scary but it was a scene that made me remark to others I was with, “This is what makes America great.”

As happy as I was to see new faces at Advocacy day (along with multiple organizations singing the same tune), in some ways it was actually a little disheartening. Collectively, these groups represent almost 5,000 members, yet together we could only muster less than one-half of 1 percent of members—in the dead of winter—to attend. At the same time, though, I view it as an encouraging starting point for future state lobbying efforts.

Ask yourself this: When you get legislative alerts from your local, state or national association, do you take the time to read about the issue and how it can affect you? Do you respond by sending letters or calling your legislators as requested? Or do you automatically delete the e-mails or throw away the faxes?

Politically speaking, I think the worst thing we can do as business people is think, “that’s someone else’s problem, not mine.” Or worse: “I’m too busy for stuff like this.” If you’re not going to go to bat for your business, your customers or your industry, then who is? Not the other guy, because very likely the other guy thinks you’re taking care of it.

One of the legislative issue briefs we brought to legislators’ attention concerned Ohio’s motor carrier safety rules. The bill did not directly affect nursery growers, as they are agriculturally exempt. It could, however, directly affect our landscape customers to the tune of \$100,000 to \$200,000 per year. So did growers go to bat on this issue? Yes, as well they should, because without their customers, they’re sunk!

I don’t particularly care for politics any better than the next guy, but I do realize that in order to win you have to play the game. While we may be farmers at heart, we must first be business professionals—and smart ones at that. If we’re to compete with other industries for consumer dollars, we must have strong grassroots lobbying efforts.

Collectively, if we all do what we’re able—even just a little bit—we can make a difference. So the next time a legislative alert comes across your desk,

I encourage you to spend the five, 10 or 15 minutes it will take to write, call or e-mail your legislators. Numbers matter. The number of constituents who voice their opinion on an issue will influence how a legislator will vote on a bill. Plus, politicians are hearing directly from those who elected them and who may or may not chose to re-elect them in the future.

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This summer, the American Nursery and Landscape Association will hold its Legislative Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C., from July 18 to 20. The event is titled: "The Opportunities are Historic. So are the Threats." The conference is a unique opportunity to rebrand the nursery, greenhouse and landscape industry in the eyes of federal policymakers, transforming the long-held perceptions of our industry as merely ornamental, and promoting ourselves as "essential" horticulture. We will position our industry and our message as a "natural" solution to policy endeavors, old and new. If those dates don't work for you then perhaps PLANET's legislative day on the hill, July 24 to 26, will. (And here's a thought: All things considered, wouldn't it make a bigger and better political statement for our industry if, going forward, the ANLA and PLANET events were held jointly in D.C.?)

Now, before you say you can't afford to attend, perhaps some of you can look at it from this angle; are you planning a family vacation? If yes, then maybe D.C. would be a wonderful destination. The city obviously offers a multitude of museums and historical sites, and at the same time you can attend the conference and set a wonderful example for your children.

Once again, I appreciate the opportunity afforded me every month to freely voice my opinion. Thank you, God Bless the Green Industry and God Bless America.

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