

Legislative Report

2009 Small Business Congress, February 12-14, 2009

Calling All Those With "Fire in the Belly!"

by Eileen Anderson

I was fortunate to attend the National Small Business Association's Small Business Congress along with other government affairs people and business owners. The congress is held every two years for the purpose of discussing policy and assembling a legislative agenda around Economic Development, Environmental and Regulatory Affairs, Health and Human Resources, and Taxation. As the issues were discussed I could feel among the attendees a sense of being caught in a "No Win" game. In contrast to that pessimism, the words of several people I happened to meet were very inspiring. We business owners must find the original "Fire in the Belly" that made us leap into entrepreneurship, take that same passion and channel it into fighting for our interests.

We hired a car to take us from the airport to the conference center. With a little encouragement, Hos, our good-natured Pakistani driver told us his story. After earning a degree in business in Indiana he moved to Miami to open a business. He and two partners ran several convenience stores successfully until they were wiped out by

water damage from a hurricane. Undeterred, he went into real estate, purchased several properties, only to be wiped out a second time by hurricanes. His attitude was unforgettable; he was buoyant even after several defeats, thankful to be in a land of opportunity, and still driven by the "Fire in the Belly."

At one of the receptions, I struck up a conversation with Jim who ran a Small Business Development Center in Virginia. He and his staff spend most of their time counseling businesses. One of his clients is a gentleman from India who came to this country with a suitcase full of clothes and \$500. Today, he has a very successful hotel management company. One day Jim visited his office and noticed, in the corner of the room, a suitcase full of clothes and an envelope with \$500. His Indian friend explained that should the time come he is ready to pick up, start a new life, and start a new business. That's the trademark of the entrepreneur's "Fire in the Belly."

The challenges we face economically and legislatively are truly unprecedented. Small businesses are caught in a Darwinian struggle for

survival. Small business is the engine of job growth. How often have we heard that? Yet here we are with an opportunity to create the jobs that can pull the nation out of recession only to find ourselves stymied by regulations, lack of credit, lack of sales, lack of affordable health care, etc.

There is legislation proposed that could fundamentally alter the nature of small business. The deceptively named "Employee Free Choice Act" will make it possible for companies as small as two employees to unionize and have contracts imposed by federal mediators. Universal health care may impose mandates requiring all employers, regardless of company size, to buy coverage for all employees. The threshold for the Family and Medical Leave Act, currently at 50 employees, could be lowered to 25, requiring employers to give three months unpaid leave to all workers. Unless Congress acts soon, in 2011 the Estate Tax will revert to its original form with a \$1 million dollar exemption and a top tax rate of 55 percent.

All of this can happen or we can fight to stop it. Advocacy does work. Lawmakers take the path of least resistance. Let's be the resistance. Rekindle the "fire in the belly." It will take effort to organize and effectively push back on legislation but SMC is here to do that. We will need you to write letters and make phone calls. If you can manage it, we need volunteers to travel to Harrisburg, on Tuesday, May 5, and to Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, June 9 and Wednesday, June 10. The choice is ours. There is nothing to lose. ▼

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▼ PEAK PERFORMANCE SELLING

Knowing Your Clients

by Scot Teachout

Sales is often focused on prospects. Where to find them and how to sell to them. However, it is much easier to maintain a relationship than form a new one. With that in mind we should have a strategy to service our current clients, strengthen our relationship, and be aware of what they are doing. The fact is that your best client is your competition's best prospect. We need a strategy to protect those clients. Many sales people put out fires with clients. If you wait to put out fires, eventually that client will burn out. Communicate with them and take a proactive interest in what they are doing. By keeping in touch with clients more you will have stronger relationships that last longer and result in more sales.

So what does taking an interest in a client look like? It means you touch base with them. Call just to see how things are going and if you can help them with anything. Clients will notice and appreciate that. Don't be obsessive and call every week but communication on a regular basis is good. Another good idea is to review what products or services of yours they are using, how those are working and plans in the future. This lets you deal with

any small fires before they become a blaze. It also lets you know what they plan to do in the future and gives you a leg up on offering products or services that might help. Use these conversations to be introductions to other people in the organization. There is nothing worse than having your only point of contact leave and have your relationship with the company dissolve because of it.

The final thing to do is the toughest. Ask them how you and your company are doing. Make it clear that you want some honest feedback. Look for criticism. Get some honest feedback. Ask your clients why they keep doing business with you instead of switching to competitors. We know competitors will come knocking and have a pretty good idea of what they will say. We might as well know how our clients will respond. This also provides a good opportunity to subtly coach them on what to say. Prepare them for all those features and benefits that the competition will throw at them. We are strengthening our relationship as well as constructing another barrier between our client and all those competitors. Knowledge is power and if you don't ask you won't know. Having this conversation makes sense for a simple reason. We review what our client likes about us, find out what they don't like, and can take action to improve. ▼

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