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OPINION

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Guest Comment

Auntie Anne's pretzel lobby

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[Auntie Anne's Inc.](#) based in Gap, Pa., is famous for its fresh-baked soft pretzels. It's also an example of how a company can engage its stakeholders -- in this case franchisees and employees -- to twist the ears of lawmakers.

Earlier this year officials at the family-owned franchise organization wanted to fire up their troops to lobby state and federal legislators about issues they thought threatened the pretzel empire. The company hired a government relations liaison who regularly sent e-mails urging franchisees and employees to write, e-mail or call their legislators on issues. But only a fraction of the folks getting the e-mails responded by contacting legislators.

Company officials were concerned about legislation that would require fast-food restaurants to include detailed information about calorie counts and protein and carbohydrate content on menus. The legislation -- surfacing in several states and before Congress -- threatened the company's growth.

Auntie Anne's leaders knew other companies had succeeded in mobilizing their employees. One of the best examples is Southwest Airlines, which operates an efficient and effective political machine within its nationwide 34,000-employee base.

Auntie Anne's had a broad network to build upon, with more than 800 locations in 43 states and 13 international territories. Pennsylvania has 75.

The company used its regional franchisee meetings to kick off the grassroots program. Officials distributed documents that franchisees used to contact their legislators on particular issues. The company also created a "varsity team" -- franchisees charged with developing even stronger relationships with their legislators by meeting with them and volunteering for their campaigns.

The effort paid off. The number of employees and franchisees participating in legislative advocacy tripled, according to Andrew Weikert, Auntie Anne's government affairs liaison. Thanks to the efforts, state and federal legislation is stalled.

There are clear lessons from this experience.

Personal contact matters. A company can't just send e-mails and expect people to respond by enthusiastically contacting legislators. Once your employees are willing to campaign, teach them how to become effective political communicators.

Show employees how to establish relationships with their congressman, senator or state legislator by attending town hall meetings, making visits and sending occasional notes. When an issue arises, the employee won't be a stranger to the elected official. Remember that often a "regular person" is the most effective messenger for a legislator.

Auntie Anne's figured out that legislative awareness programs require organization, time and resources. They also learned that a franchisee network can get the attention of elected officials.

Amy Showalter owns the Cincinnati-based Showalter Group, which advises companies, trade organizations and nonprofit organizations on

how to increase their grassroots and lobbying effectiveness.

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