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## Why it pays to make politics your business

Jeff Wuorio

Mike Wilkinson doesn't pound on the doors of government every waking hour.

But the chief executive officer of Plano, Texas-based Paragon Innovations knew he had to speak up against an outdated law specifying that only those licensed by the Texas Board of Engineers can legally refer to themselves as engineers. Wilkinson testified to the state legislature that the law effectively discriminated against out-of-state engineers who happened not to have the Texas designation.

"It was a time when I realized 'OK, I can help here,'" Wilkinson says.

In one way, Wilkinson's foray into politics puts the lie to the notion that small business and politics simply don't mix. Further, it also shows that a political stance — however it happens to take shape — can be essential to your business. In fact, smart political savvy may even boost your business.

"Expecting government not to impact you if you pay your taxes and run your business properly is like expecting a bull not to charge because you're a vegetarian," says Amy Showalter, a Cincinnati-based consultant who assists businesses in developing a political presence.

### Keeping a watch on government

Understand that a politically-minded business doesn't necessarily mandate wearing your views on your sleeve (and alienating customers and clients who don't go along with your views). Rather, it can simply mean an active role of observation — keeping an eye on various governmental levels to spot anything that may impact your operation.

"The owner or someone else [at your



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business] should constantly be monitoring trade issues, legislation and other things," Showalter says.

Small-business owners also should not assume that a lack of size means a lack of muscle in the political arena. That's simply not the case. The sheer numbers of small to medium-sized businesses unto themselves suggests a powerful political force.

"Frankly, I've never met a lawmaker who's ever said a single bad word about small business. No legislator in his right mind would ever want to be identified with that," Showalter says. "Small businesses really need to leverage that kind of position."

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Your relationship with legislators and other government officials representing your area can take a number of forms. On one level, it can be as simple as getting to know the government representatives at various levels. Familiarize yourself with their varied positions and how they may influence what you do.

"It's essential to create relationships with key people, from the mayor of your town to your congressperson," says Joan Michelson, the Henderson, Nev.-based president of Michelson/Cooper Marketing. "Look at what they do and how it affects your business model."

**Getting active, and getting employees involved**

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If need be, take your politics to a more active role. If it's practical, don't be gun-shy about following Wilkinson's lead if a particular piece of legislation concerns you. As Wilkinson points out, listening to a businessperson can often be more persuasive than the same words from a paid lobbyist.

"A CEO, no matter if he or she is from a big or small company, can really make a big impression," he says.

Handling a high-profile issue with astuteness and political savvy may not only rally like-minded people to your cause, but it also may bring in more customers. Note the risk involved with increased visibility, however. Such a move, especially if you are a political novice, could also backfire and seriously hurt your image and business. So proceed with

care, conviction and also some insight as to how people will react to your point of view.

But the CEO or business owner shouldn't be the only one in a business tracking political developments and, if need be, voicing an opinion. Showalter urges business owners to encourage political awareness among their employees, whether through a regular newsletter or discussions about issues and political trends.

"Educate your employees and make it convenient for them to become involved," Showalter says. "Make sure they're registered to vote and have them contact the League of Women Voters if they have a question about a particular issue."

However, approach employee involvement carefully. For one thing, don't try to force involvement on employees who want to stay on the political sidelines. Moreover, don't force on them your point of view. Instead, Showalter says, it can be particularly effective to present employees with both sides of an issue and let them decide where they stand. That sense of overall balance even carries over to the point of allowing an employee with a drastically different opinion to openly speak his or her mind.

"You can't be the speech police — it's important to tolerate dissent," Showalter says. "Look at this from the long term. One person speaking out in opposition to your position isn't going to change the course of history." (Note: Employees who champion their own political causes is a separate issue, and beyond the scope of this column.)

### **How much is too much, or too little?**

It's also critical to know what level of political involvement is appropriate. While it's essential to keep abreast of developments and react as necessary, don't tackle too much, too often.

"Unless you present yourself well, you can come across as a whiner," says Wilkinson. "More words don't necessarily make your position stronger."

But far worse — and potentially disastrous — is the other extreme of simply doing nothing. Although internal business decisions direct the course of your operation, never lose sight of the reality that even the most robust of businesses can suffer at the hands of ill-timed or poorly reasoned legislation or regulation.

"Public policy infiltrates everything — and trying to ignore it is a recipe for disaster," Michelson says. "You need to become involved. If you don't, your business may be harmed. And you'll just end up frustrated as well."

*Jeff Wuorio is an award-winning writer and columnist, and is the author of "[The CNBC Guide](#)*

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