

How NRF Retail Champions Engage Their Underdog Edge for Legislative Advocacy Success

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When I spoke at the NRF Main Street Retailing Forum, I shared with NRF small retailer members how to engage their inherent “underdog edge” to influence legislators. When I learned of the NRF Retail Champion Awards, I knew that I had to talk to these intrepid advocates to find out more about how they use underdog tactics to not only thrive but survive in the legislative influence jungle. The following is excerpts of my interviews with the 2014 America’s Retail Champion of the Year, Art Potash of Potash Markets in Chicago, and Erin Calvo-Bacci with the Chocolate Truffle in Reading, Massachusetts, a Retail Champion Nominee.

Art Potash as the “Secret Weapon”

All small retailers must remember that just because you’re an underdog, while people may want to help you and your cause, it doesn’t mean you’ll always win. You have to employ certain tactics in the correct ways to win. But rest assured, the big dogs want to help you. Art Potash reminded me of this when he stated that U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) referred to him as his “secret weapon” when gathering support for the debit card swipe fee issue. As Art reflected on that experience, “I certainly wasn’t a professional, and Dick Durbin didn’t want someone perceived as ‘slick’.”

The Duty to Advocate

We found in our research that many successful underdogs simply do not quit because they feel a sense of duty, even a calling, to advocate for their interests. Erin is one of those. “I figure that if decisions are made for me, I’d rather be in on the decision. I educate other small business owners and ask them if they know what’s happening in the state and federal legislatures. I show them the evidence, the numbers that they can relate to. Business people understand that numbers don’t lie. I take a very evidence-based approach. What keeps me going is that I view what I do as a service to others.”

Grit

According to my research, most successful underdogs stay focused on their goal for a minimum of a year, and Art told me that he had been at it for over 30 years. “All along the way there are times of extreme frustration. I’ve asked myself if it was worth it. Sometimes due to fatigue in general, or because of a specific issue, I would get discouraged. In those moments, I would think about my business to divert my attention. As I focused on my business, sure enough I’d see again how the external environment impacts my business plans. They are inseparable.”

Build Your Pack

Erin reminds us that you have to find like-minded supporters. “There’s something about being on a team that’s rewarding, but not every group is best for you. Some groups are only social and they don’t really want to make change, but if your goal is to change things and move forward, you need to find out which organizations work. You have to attend the events, hear from their leaders and let them know who you are and what you can offer. I was found by a local developer. He tracked my involvement and asked me to get involved.”

Pack Your Passion

Effective underdogs know that passion for their cause must be deployed judiciously. Erin advised, “Don’t be emotional! You have to take the emotion out of it. You have to be a good listener. I like to create a dialogue and find out what the other person thinks. If a legislator tells me that they are supporting jobs, yet they are voting for policies that obviously hurt job creation, I will slightly challenge them and say something like, ‘I heard you want to create jobs, so tell me how you want to do that? Tell me how you think your policies will help our economy.’ That creates a dialogue and helps break the ice. I let them talk a lot. Even though it’s hard, I have to step back sometimes and listen to another angle. In the moment I have to become a bit dispassionate about my point of view.”

Does Political Involvement Hurt Their Business?

I had to ask them about the “elephant in the room” ---- whether being politically active has ever affected their business, because many business owners refrain from the political environment due to potential customer alienation. “I have received ‘How dare you’ unsigned letters about my political involvement.” Erin said. “I don’t want the government telling me what I can and can’t believe. It’s okay to disagree, but it’s better to be free. So I just press on.”

Again, thanks Art and Erin for your words of wisdom and inspiration!