Meet and Greet on the Hill
Before hitting Capitol Hill, CAD attendees took a crash course in lobbying and grassroots activism. Drawing on cringe-worthy real-world examples (legislative aides who can’t stop checking their smartphones, lawmakers more interested in press than action, egomaniacs, etc.), advocacy guru Stephanie Vance walked participants through talking points and provided insight on how to break the ice and make a lasting impression. Armed with that advice, many found that the day brought a healthy mix of small victories, expected standstills and plenty of surprises.

For some attendees, success came early. At press time, longtime CAD participant David Boulton, AAF, PFCI, of Flowers by George in Arlington, Wash., had already heard from the offices of Reps. Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) and Suzan DelBene (D-Wash). “They both requested more information on the health care issues affecting my business,” he said. “We felt like they were in support and on our side.”

Toomie Farris, AAF, AIFD, has never been a “wait and see” kind of guy. The owner of McNamara Florist in Fishers, Ind., prefers to make a decision, implement it, and then move on. That mindset has helped Farris become a successful small-business owner, but it also positioned him to be, well, underwhelmed when he attended SAF’s Congressional Action Days (CAD) last year.

“Slow decisions frustrate me,” Farris admitted, and lawmakers in Washington, D.C., often move at a glacial pace, or so it seems to a go-getter like Farris. Nonetheless, he decided to give the grassroots effort one more shot, during SAF’s 34th Annual CAD in March. This year, his experience was “completely different”: Instead of excuses, he found productive conversations. In place of partisan showmanship, he encountered people who were at least ready to listen.

Why the change? In part, Farris credits advice from experts who addressed CAD attendees before they met with lawmakers’ office. Messages that resonated: Be yourself and do what you do best — sell. “The lessons helped me act like a salesperson,” he said. “I just went in with our agenda and our talking points and sold the need for our issues.”

During the two-day conference, Farris and nearly 80 growers, wholesalers, retailers and suppliers from 20 states met with representatives from congressional offices to advocate for immigration reform for agriculture and targeted fixes to the Affordable Care Act, including an adjustment to raise the definition of full-time employment from 30 to 40 hours. Using personal stories, the SAF delegation put aside politics and instead focused on the human toll of bad policy and the fundamental economics of each issue, messages SAF President Shirley Lyons, AAF, PFCI, said must be reinforced again … and again.

“CAD is about the power of persistence and moving the needle bit by bit,” said Lyons, owner of Dandelions Flowers & Gifts in Eugene, Ore. “[These issues] affect the bottom line of our business. Coming to Washington really does make an impact.”
David Mitchell, AAF, of Mitchell’s Flowers & Events in Orland Park, Ill., received an even warmer reception from the office of Rep. Rodney Davis (R-Ill.). Thanks to good timing, Mitchell accompanied Davis to the House, where the congressman introduced a bill (unrelated to CAD efforts).

Walter Rojahn Jr., AAF, of Rojahn & Malaney Co. in Milwaukee, Wis., said his best meeting came in the office of Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.); one of the senator’s legislative aides happens to be a customer of Memorial Florists & Greenhouses in Appleton, Wis., which is owned by Bob Aykens, AAF, a member of SAF’s Wisconsin CAD group. “That created a strong connection,” Rojahn said. “We all felt we had made an exceptional impact on that office.”

Skip Paal, AAF, of Rutland Beard Floral Group in Baltimore, Md., was surprised to see Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) during his group’s meeting. Paal talked about the health care law’s definition of full-time employment during his meetings. “It’s a big deal for us,” he said. “We’re right on the cusp.”

Farris also experienced unexpected meetings with actual members of Congress. After recognizing the florist’s store name, Rep. André Carson (D-Ind.) and Rep. Todd Young (R-Ind.) visited with Farris for about 10 to 15 minutes a piece. “They’re polar opposites” politically, Farris said, but both lawmakers asked questions — Carson kept saying, “What can I do for you?” — and made personal connections to Farris and his business: Young’s father owned a business less than six blocks from McNamara Florist. “My day was much better than last year,” Farris said. “I’ll certainly be back next year.”

**Finding Shared Ground**

Of course, not every meeting ended with a call to action answered — or a walk down memory lane. Dr. Marvin Miller, AAF, of Ball Horticultural Company in West Chicago, Ill., and chairman of this year’s event, reported that several lawmakers “seemed to still be dodging the immigration reform issue,” he said. In one of the 20 offices the Illinois delegation visited, an aide “tried to suggest their office had their hands full [with international issues],” Miller said. “I interrupted her to tell her we’ve been up on the Hill for 15 years arguing the case for immigration reform and I wasn’t accepting these as valid excuses.” The same aide, however, promised to follow up with SAF to learn more about the ACA seasonal labor issue — a positive turn of events Miller wasn’t expecting. “So, go figure,” he said.

Robert Otsuka of the San Francisco Flower Mart, another longtime CAD attendee, is often across the aisle from his legislators; in the past, he’s struggled to find common ground with Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), but this year was different. “When we presented issues for immigration and ACA, we were on the same side of the ledger,” he said. “It’s the first time that’s happened. I guess we’ve been
around long enough where we see [policies] come full circle.”

Lyons had also prepared herself for an “adversarial conversation” with some of her lawmakers from Oregon. Instead, a staff member agreed with her when she pitched him on immigration reform. “He said, ‘we’re with you on that,’” Lyons said. That was a great surprise.”

During her meetings, Catherine Jakaitis of Floralife in Walterboro, S.C., emphasized how much confusion surrounded immigration laws and health care reform, and how difficult it is for a small-business owner to move forward when the rules aren’t clear. For her, returning to Washington for a third CAD this year was about building on existing relationships. “I write my reps on a regular basis,” she said with a laugh. When she argued for the industry issues, though, she also urged lawmakers to work together. “Infighting is very disruptive to business,” she said.
MOD SQUAD. The Michigan delegation navigates the halls of Congress together: Carol Miller of Meister Media in Willoughby; Michael Geary of AmericanHort (a CAD sponsor) in Columbus; and Jacque Sir Louis and Robert Williams II, AAF, PFCI, of Smithers-Oasis North America.

HEADS TOGETHER. Del Demaree, AAF, of Syndicate Sales in Kokomo, Ind., discusses his plans for CAD with Pat and David Armellini of Armellini Express Lines in Palm City, Fla. Demaree and David were veterans at the event; this year was a first for Pat, who gleaned tips from other members and experts alongside about a dozen other first-timers.

FAUX POLICIES. The current immigration system has created “tremendous human suffering,” said Lorence Wenke of Wenke Greenhouses in Kalamazoo, Mich. Wenke used his own experience to paint a vivid picture of the challenges the industry faces in finding and keeping a stable, legal workforce.

FIRST PERSON. Walter Rojahn Jr., AAF, of Rojahn & Malaney Co. in Milwaukee, Wis., Bob Aykens, AAF, of Memorial Florists & Greenhouses in Appleton, Wis., and Stephen and Penny Kennicott of Kennicott Kuts in Waterford, Wis., share their stories with staff members on the Hill. Rojahn said he felt an especially strong connection in the office of Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), where a legislative aide happens to be one of Aykens’ customers.

Back Home, the Effort Continues
In some ways, the real work of effecting change began after industry members left Capitol Hill, with the email and follow-up required to maintain those important relationships. To underscore how much immigration and health care mean to him, SAF’s president-elect Martin Meskers invited several staff members in the offices of Reps. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) and Greg Walden (R-Ore.) to visit his nursery this summer.

Second-time attendee Dana Cook of Julia’s Florist in Wilmington, N.C., said her takeaway from the event was simple:

Persistence matters. “When we walked into Sen. [Richard] Burr’s (R-N.C.) office, the staff member remembered me from last year,” she said, adding that the North Carolina group lobbied hard for all of the issues highlighted during this year’s event. Immigration is huge for my state, and the ACA issues, the seasonality definition? It’s all important.”

For Cook, CAD wasn’t about seeing radical progress overnight, so she’s not benchmarking her success by what happens in the short term. Instead, she said, she wanted to add her voice to a chorus that’s demanding action. “I could stay home and complain and watch the distance between large companies and small independents grow, but if I didn’t come to Washington, I’d have no chance to level the playing field,” she said. “Change comes in numbers.”

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