



From the Guest Publisher

# Political Advocacy Can Boost Bottom Line

By Dennis Wicker

**M**any people's interest in politics is piqued this year, given the hot presidential race and the rare attention given to the State of North Carolina. Additionally in 2008, we're selecting political candidates, from governor and U.S. senator to state legislators and county commissioners.

However, if you are a business leader, you should monitor politics closely *every year*. That's because the decisions made by our elected and non-elected officials can make a major difference to your bottom line. And if you're not engaged, it could be costing you money.

Many law firms have been beefing up their government relations practices as the world of legislation and regulation becomes more and more complex. It is difficult enough for the average citizen to access the political process, much less busy business executives juggling multiple tasks.

CEOs should seek attorneys and professionals who specialize in government relations when political needs arise. The relationships and knowledge that these professionals have built after years of experience in government proves invaluable when you're fighting for or against a government agency's ruling that impacts your business.

As laws and regulations rapidly change, an attorney who understands government and its leaders can help you analyze public policy, identify concerns and opportunities, advocate key interests at high levels, coordinate potential coalitions, counsel on compliance and prepare your organization to participate in the legislative process.

It is not just large corporations that benefit from active government relations programs. Medium-sized and smaller businesses, nonprofits, entrepreneurs and trade associations all have interests that are affected by government. Is your voice being heard...or *your* competitor's?

If you go strictly by media accounts, it is easy to believe that engaging government devolves into "influence-peddling" rather quickly. However, that is a caricature of reality. Advocates provide vital information about how to make one's best case to government, not a guaranteed result.

Knowing how to access the process, who to talk with in which departments, what fac-

tors may be important to a decision, when to make your argument...these are all strategic points with which government relations professionals can assist. When "politics" invades your business, you will want to be prepared because governmental decisions made are only as good as the information provided by the impacted parties.

So how do you find the right attorney to fit your advocacy needs? Some law firms concentrate their government relations practices solely on lobbying the state legislature. Others offer a wider range of services, addressing matters here in Raleigh, Washington, D.C., or a local county seat.

Organizations benefit when choosing government relations lawyers and professionals who are savvy about matters such as media relations, political campaigns and formulating public policy. This sort of layered, multi-dimensional approach can be constructive in sensitive situations.

Usually, government relations attorneys

will charge a fixed fee or a monthly retainer to work on a case rather than the traditional hourly billing model. This enables a business to know up front what the costs will be and allows its leaders to determine whether they are getting value for the investment.

The temptation in tough economic times is to cut back services such as advertising, marketing and government relations. But rather than viewing these items as cost centers, business should view them as opportunity-makers. The difference is being pro-active when others are simply reactive. ■

*Dennis Wicker is a partner and leader of the Government Relations Practice Group at the law firm of SZD Wicker and can be reached at 919-256-5760 or [dwickerszdwicker.com](mailto:dwickerszdwicker.com). He is a former two-term lieutenant governor and previously served in the North Carolina General Assembly for 12 years, including four years as House majority leader. He was selected as a Triangle Impact Business Leader in 2008.*