

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# CW Goes to Washington

When NAMM asked me to join its annual lobbying trip in Washington, D.C., two years ago, I had some ambivalence. On one hand, it would be foolish to not help my fellow dealers and myself by helping NAMM. I really do believe in the benefits of early music education and think it's one of the best places to spend our tax dollars. But there's something unseemly about lobbying — isn't there? After all, the press has nothing good to say about lobbyists. Then I did a little research.

The term "lobby" may have been coined by Ulysses S. Grant to describe citizens who hung out in the lobby of the Willard Hotel — where he sipped brandy and chomped cigars — waiting for their chance to buttonhole a legislator, cabinet member or even the president himself. (Today, we just send a polite e-mail to our representative or senator and request a meeting.)

We live in a democracy. Citizens have the right, even the obligation, to petition their leaders. Besides, if we don't do it, who will? So off I went, unprepared and not knowing what to expect.

## HOW TO LOBBY

Thankfully, NAMM's team is very well-organized and, with its Washington representatives, knows exactly what to do. First, they know that we have many important legislative issues to cover and little time with members of Congress and their aides. They know that federal funding for elementary and secondary education is likely to be at the top of the agenda in the next session after the fall election. And they know who sits on the important committees that authorize and appropriate funds.

NAMM has a clever strategy for getting meetings with the right people: They use constituents. That's right — the 23

NAMM members who volunteered for this effort live and work in the districts and states of the senators and representatives who will write the legislation that affects us. It turns out that politicians are very interested in talking with people from home, people who can vote for them and employ other potential voters.

NAMM has also retained some very influential, very smart advisors, such as former Secretary of Education Richard Riley and former Rep. Butler Derrick. Though retired, they all have a personal passion for music

education and an intimate knowledge of how Washington works.

Also worth noting: The process for participating in NAMM's fly-in changed this year. Now any member could opt in to the lobbying effort, which was held in mid-May. About half of us had been on one of the three previous trips, but this was the largest lobbying effort by far, comprising nine teams of one to three people each.

There were leaders from big suppliers, such as Hal Leonard; little dealers like me; and everything in between. Our common denominator was a stern conviction that music needs to remain core curriculum in the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) — or whatever they decide to call federal funding for elementary and secondary education next year — and that funding needs to increase, so every kid has a chance to play in band.

## TAKING THE HILL

After a full day of training and briefing, we were ready to charge the Hill. We had been warned that we might have just a few moments to capture our legislator's attention and communicate our message.

Meetings often took place in a senator's office, but they also happened in hallways,



**The customer whisperer lobbies for music education on Capitol Hill**

lobbies and elevators. Sometimes, we had the big cheese, but more often, we spoke with a legislative aide. These aides are very important. They're the people who actually write the legislation. It's better to have an aide alone than a senator without an aide. Also, many of these smart, young people have long government careers, so seeds we planted on the trip may well bloom later.

Each team had its own style, but we decided to capitalize on our strengths. After brief stints in the humble congressional waiting rooms, whichever of us was from the home district said "hello" and introduced the others. Then, it was down to business. We presented the compelling statistics from NAMM-funded research, which proves early music instruction is a better way to get higher math and reading scores than remedial tutoring.

At the right moment, we also asked our host if he or she had ever played a musical instrument. This question had a magical effect. Tense faces smiled. Stiff shoulders loosened, and we heard stories of band trips, piano recitals and beloved music teachers. The meeting's tone turned on a dime. And it happened in most of our meetings. Our hosts internalized our message because they had been the smart kids in school and so were their friends. And they all played music.

I spoke last because I was the "closer." A brief recap and a simple request: When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is reauthorized, keep music and arts as core curriculum, provide schools more flexibility and increase funding under Title 1, so every



From left: Willis Music's Kevin Cranley, NAMM's Joe Lamond, former MENC Executive Director John Mahlmann, Schmitt Music's Tom Schmitt and Paige's Music's Mark Goff



From left: Sen. Kay Hagan, former Secretary of Education Richard Riley, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough's Leo Coco and Schmitt Music's Tom Schmitt



From left: Greg and Sara Billings, "Sesame Street" star Bob McGrath, and Steinway Piano Gallery - Madison's Grant Billings

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child has access to music and the arts as part of a complete, quality education.

**LOBBYING IS SELLING**

Everyone we spoke with pledged his or her support. Even those who started a meeting with sound-bite references to state's rights and rants about how much they hated NCLB and how it handcuffed principals and worked against local control were willing to get behind music education.

But political support can be ephemeral, and NAMM is going to have to come back to Washington again and again on behalf of music education, access to protected exotic resources and other small business issues. As our Chairman Tom Schmitt of Schmitt Music said, "Think about the groups that aren't

here pressing their cause."

The customer whisperer discovered that lobbying is selling — greeting, creating rapport, establishing expertise, handling objections, presenting an irresistible option and asking for a decision. To NAMM's credit, it relies on what our industry has plenty of: salespeople. Our team had 11 successful meetings in a day and a half. The other eight teams reported almost identical results.

Did we change the world? No. Did we change some minds? Yes. Did we do some good? Definitely. **MI**

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