

Site Visits: Planning from A to Z

Facility tours provide one of the most effective methods of communication between your company and its government and community leaders. In an era of quality communications trumping quantity, face-to-face communications with legislators produce particularly effective advocacy. Facility tours/site visits are a very good vehicle to provide mutual benefit and generate real learning.

A visit to your facility will give your senators, congressional representatives, state legislators, or local officials the valuable opportunity to meet a large number of their constituents while helping them develop a good sense of the role the facility plays in the community. Facility tours present you and other staff a chance to get to know legislators, put a face and name behind your business, and pass along a first-hand description of the facility's progress and problems.

Careful planning for a visit by a legislator, as with any important visitor, maximizes results. The following general points are helpful to setting up a non-campaign facility tour:

Before the Invitation:

1. Contact your Government Affairs/Public Affairs Office so that a public affairs representative may attend your tour.
2. Determine your agenda. Is your goal to address specific legislation or develop the relationship? Tailor your agenda to the legislator's interests as this will help you increase your invitation's likelihood of acceptance.
3. Have a defined tour schedule that allows enough time to tour the facilities and to enjoy informal discussion.
4. In appropriate situations, select a key hourly representative to accompany you on the tour and to assist in the planning and implementation.
5. Map out the tour. Choose the particular areas that illustrate the points you want to make. Select guides from among the more articulate and politically active employees. Include quiet areas to talk along the way.
6. Arrange to have a photographer cover the tour.
7. Determine in advance if local press coverage is desired and, if so, who should make the appropriate arrangements.
8. Make sure key machinery and equipment are operational. Action is essential for an interesting tour.

The Invitation:

1. Reach out to the legislator's office to determine how they prefer to receive official invitations. Current mail delays on Capitol Hill heavily impact the appointment process. Additionally, legislators receive hundreds of invitations. Those received in a preferred method (mail, e-mail, fax, phone, district office, etc) will get attention first.

2. Don't be discouraged if it takes several invitations before the legislator accepts. Legislators have many demands on their time. Your persistence will pay off.
3. Begin scheduling about two months in advance. If you are interested in a member visiting during the busy August recess, begin your invitation process in June.
4. Provide multiple dates and times for the legislator's convenience. Flexibility on your part increases your chances of acceptance.
5. Provide the official with a personalized packet of information about the organization and the visit.
6. Make your invitation intriguing. Do you make something interesting or provide a unique service? Experiential visits for a legislator have the strongest impact.

Spreading the Word:

1. Let employees know the exact date and time of the visit in advance.
2. If possible, share the highlights of the visitor's biography.
3. Market the program with posters, e-mail and intranet announcements, voice mails, etc. It's a big deal and should be talked about as such.
4. Recruit key contacts and prominent organization leaders to play a role in the visit and create buzz.

Conducting the Tour:

1. The senior executive on site should be on hand to greet the official first.
2. Start with a brief introductory session in an office to overview the day. Include who and what the official will see.
3. Rope off any potentially hazardous areas. Be sure adequate sets of safety gear are available for all guests.
4. Keep close track of time. Don't rush the tour, but keep things moving. Find out how much time your guest has.
5. Introduce employees by name. Remember, all employees are constituents.
6. Leave someone in charge of receiving messages for the legislator and make sure that person knows where to reach you during the tour.
7. Consider following the tour with a short private discussion in your office. It might be advantageous to arrange for the legislator to meet with selected employees. In either case, discuss with the legislator those issues of greatest importance to the company and the facility.
8. Schedule a special (and brief) event with the legislator as a reward for your PAC's contributors or the members of your grassroots program.

After the Tour:

1. Send a follow up thank you to the legislator and a courtesy copy to any staff that attended.
2. Provide the official and his/her press aide any press clippings that covered the event (including your own newsletters).
3. Maintain this relationship by keeping up with the legislator and designated staff on legislative issues of relevance.

4. Offer to remain available to the official and his/her staff as a resource on the industry.
5. Follow up with the employees/members in attendance. Thank them for representing the organization and educating the legislator. Encourage your employees to sign up/remain active as grassroots advocates.