



MEBA's Research and Educational Arm: the Role of the American Maritime Congress

MEBA's political action team effort has three key elements. All fit closely together.

The first element, as other articles in this issue emphasize, is participation by MEBA members in making their voices heard directly with their local, state, and federal government representatives and in supporting the MEBA Political Action Fund.

The second element is the leadership of MEBA, coordinating and managing the union's political action, focusing on important issues and political supporters.

The third element consists of research and education, informing and communicating. Here, the American Maritime Congress plays a vital role – for MEBA and its membership, for MEBA-contracted U.S.-flag ship operating companies, and in many cases, for the American maritime industry as a whole.

Education begins when a new Member of the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate or a new Executive Branch official takes office – and often before this. When seeking national public office, for example, candidates will want to know about the U.S. Merchant Marine, its major programs, and its issues of concern. Or, an Executive Branch official, nominated for a maritime-related post, will want background information on the industry and to meet with its key leaders. AMC, for example, often prepares a maritime fact sheet for new legislators with background on the U.S. Merchant Marine, on its importance to America's economic and military security, and on several important laws and programs such as the Maritime Security Program, the Jones Act, and cargo preference.

In this opening effort, the well-known advice of “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” is particularly important. The information they receive must be correct, and thus reliable and credible. For our industry, which has strong allies on both sides of the aisle, it must be bipartisan. It must be concise and well presented and thus useful to Members of Congress and their staffs who have literally dozens of different issues to deal with every day. Often, it must say who or what group is on the opposite side of an issue, what their arguments are, and what our answer is to their arguments. Once this foundation of trust and usefulness is established, a lawmaker or his or her staff will return again and again for our input. Thus, we are able to build upon that trust and relationship early on.

The stronger this confidence is, the more important it becomes. AMC is often asked to provide draft statements for the “Congressional Record,” drafts of letters for Congressmen and Senators to send to their colleagues or to the President, and talking points for speeches.

In other instances, a maritime-related issue will suddenly hit the floor of the House or Senate, and legislators' offices, already inundated with many other issues, will want to know the maritime industry's point of view. On very short notice, our input must be factual, responsive to the legislators' needs, and coordinated with MEBA and its contracted companies and with others in the industry. Because time can be of the essence, it is not unusual for AMC to be one of the few sources consulted – and this puts a premium on accuracy, reliability, comprehensiveness and balance.

To accomplish this, it means AMC keeps constantly on top of a wide variety of issues through many published sources such as trade journals, newspapers, and, of course, internet research. However, there is more to research and education than just reading what everyone else reads. Equally important is to be in direct, regular and personal communication with staff on Capitol Hill and in Executive Branch offices, using contacts often built up over many years, with MEBA and its contracted companies, and with other private sector offices in Washington, D.C. that also follow maritime issues. This process of gathering information and personal contacts is never ending.

The importance of this personal communication has been demonstrated over and over again during my 25 years at AMC in two lessons we forget at our peril. First, never assume you know where someone will come down on an issue, even if they might have been “right” on an issue in the past or would appear to be supportive naturally because of a marine asset (such as a port or shipping company) in their state. *Assuming* is no substitute for picking up the phone and asking. Second, your work does not stop just because you write a letter on behalf of your organization or coalition. Personal follow-up and “bird-dogging” the issue with sustained information and education are essential.

Finally, much of AMC's work in Washington, D.C. is as part of an industry-wide coalition, management and labor, to present a strong, unified force on issues that affect the entire maritime industry, and with it MEBA ships and jobs. These coalition efforts have been highly effective in promoting MSP, protecting the Jones Act and safeguarding the cargo preference laws.

To sum up this column, we at AMC research and communicate the facts; we educate our congressional supporters; we alert the industry; and because of our track record, we can lead. That is why AMC and its research, education, information and communication play a critical role in MEBA political action. ■