

## Small businesses reach big summit

By: Lisa Lerer

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Ted Boosalis is a third-generation owner of Costa's, a 90-year-old sandwich shop and candy company in the heart of Owatonna, Minn., population 22,434. But for a day or two, he's taking a crack at playing a Washington insider.

Boosalis and more than 500 of his peers were in Washington on Thursday and Friday for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's annual Small Business Summit. Hailing from 35 states, participants spent two days networking, attending training seminars and listening to speeches from such political stars as former House speaker Newt Gingrich.

The small army of small businessmen also spent some time on Capitol Hill, pitching their local House and Senate representatives on issues of concern. "The congressmen and senators need to see us to understand we're the faces behind the agenda," Boosalis said after meeting with Rep. Timothy J. Walz (D-Minn.). While the Owatonna contingent worked their state delegation on Thursday, spa owners, small manufacturers and software developers visited more than 180 other congressional offices.

The chamber is one of the biggest business federations in the world, representing over 3 million companies. It's also one of the most powerful lobbies in town. Last year the chamber and its affiliate, the U.S. Chamber Institute for Legal Reform, spent \$72.7 million on lobbying, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. That's more than any other advocacy organization.

But the chamber's success also stems from its local tactics. The organization is ideally structured for regional action. Its 300 Washington-based employees serve as an umbrella organization for more than 3,000 local chambers, 830 associations and eight regional offices.

The chamber uses its regional reach to hit Congress' sweet spot: local votes. "There is no better lobbyist than the person from the district telling their story," says Douglas Loon, the chamber's vice president of regional affairs and advocacy.

It's not the only organization in town swarming Capitol Hill with constituent lobbyists. But the chamber's small business summit is one of the year's biggest Hill pushes. It's an important event for the chamber, as 96 percent of its membership is made up of businesses with fewer than 100 employees.

The small business owners spent their own money to come to Washington, where they were briefed on top policy issues in the chamber's ornate headquarters across the street from the White House. In addition to Gingrich, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) spoke to attendees, who also witnessed a mini-debate between conservative pundit Bill Kristol and Democratic strategist Donna Brazile. Friday's entertainment included the Capitol Steps, a singing ensemble that pokes fun at Washington egos.

Before heading to the Hill, they were given chamber-drafted talking points that included five legislative priorities they could discuss with their representatives. No. 1 on the list was the Employee Free Choice Act, also known as “card check,” which would make it easier for unions to organize. The bill passed the House in March. The Chamber of Commerce opposes it, arguing it could be used to coerce workers into union membership. Also on the list: the pending immigration legislation, transportation issues, health care and the No Child Left Behind education legislation that is up for reauthorization. Participants were encouraged to describe their own business problems.

With 72 business owners, Minnesota sent the largest delegation, so they split into several groups. Boosalis was in a contingent that included a construction company owner, a mid-size manufacturing company executive and staff from the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce offices.

Walz ushered them into his Capitol Hill offices, where they spent roughly a half-hour focusing mostly on health care. Boosalis’ health care costs increased by 18 percent for his 10 employees over the past several years, he told the congressman. He can afford to insure only himself and one employee. “I have to ration health care because of the expense,” he said.

Mark Ellison, an executive at the Eagan, Minn.-based Ergotron, a company that manufactures wall mountings for monitors, echoed Boosalis’ concerns. Health care costs for his 300 employees went up 24 percent last year. “We had to forego raises to manage the health care costs,” he said.

The congressman had his own message to deliver in the meeting. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce ran television ads in February urging voters to call the Democrat and question his support for the card-check legislation backed by labor leaders. Walz voted for legislation — and wasn’t happy about the ads.

“He brought those up three times in the meeting,” said Loon. “I told him to reconsider his vote.”

After the meeting, Boosalis and a handful of other constituents mingled in front of Walz’s office. Some waited to get their glamour shot with the congressman. Boosalis scored his photograph, but others went away without the coveted souvenir.

This is the Owatonna’s third trip to Washington to participate in the chamber event, and it seems to be paying off. Contact with Walz has increased, and the Democrat also spoke at the local chamber meeting in April.

“We don’t have to agree, but the one thing that’s important is that we’re engaging early,” said Boosalis. “When the bill is on the floor, it’s too late.”