When meeting with lawmakers it is important that you are able to effectively communicate the value that your business brings to the community. Storytelling is the difference between rambling off data and giving it meaning.

Storytelling may seem like an old-fashioned tool today — and it is. That’s exactly what makes it so powerful. A story can go where quantitative analysis is denied admission: our hearts. Data can persuade people, but it doesn’t inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that fires the imagination. Just stating what you do or what your company does in complex or boring terms can bring the conversation to a screeching - and quite awkward - halt.

Legislators and their staff hear from hundreds of people in a day. Presenting your information in a narrative can help you and your issue resonate and be remembered. The hope is that you will have grabbed their interest and now they are intrigued, asking questions and continuing the conversation.

For Congress, there are two main goals for stories:

• Relationship building: explaining the foodservice industry, who you are in their Congressional district and something that you do for your employees, your customers or the community.

• An issue: how it directly impacts your company, your employees, your customers and/or your community and what could be done about it.

“With government playing a larger and larger role in our business, none of us can afford to sit on the sidelines. Our lawmakers need to know about our companies, what we mean to our communities and to the economy, and that we recognize our responsibilities as employers.”

- Tom Zatina, President & CEO McLane Foodservice
How to Write Stories

Write down what you and your company do.
Write it many different ways. Brainstorm. Don’t edit yourself at all. You will edit later. This first step is for generating ideas. Talk to other departments about how legislation and regulations have impacted their lives and jobs. You can make it personal – how does your job fit into the supply chain? Don’t hold back. Ideas can be goofy, serious, wild, funny, or conservative. It doesn’t matter. The goal is to get at many ideas as possible down on paper.

Begin with the end in mind.
Know your objective. Do you want your Member of Congress to understand how your business works? Something that you do in the district? Is there a specific ask for an issue? A good storyteller begins knowing what the end product should deliver emotionally.

Write action statements.
This is a statement or question designed to spur the action associated with your goal.

Let it sit.
Come back later to what you’ve written with fresh eyes and ears.

Highlight the good stuff.
Read through what you’ve written. Then either highlight or circle the phrases that hook you with clear, powerful, and visual words. Obviously not all the words will fall into these categories. You still need connector words, but you want them to be as few as possible.

Write a story (or several) that illustrate what you do for people (your employees, customers, and community).
If necessary, the story can be long; you will boil it down later. Paint a picture with words. See the Story Elements sidebar.

Dress Rehearsal
Run it by as many people as you can get to listen to you. Get feedback from colleagues, clients you trust, friends and family.

Done for now.
Take your final stories and write them down. Practice until you are not reciting; the story just slides off your tongue naturally in conversation.

Continue to improve.
Over time, always be on the listen for phrases that you think could make your story more clear and impactful. And then test it out. Every once in a while you will probably benefit by starting from scratch because things always change: you, your business, your goals, and your customers’ needs.

Remember to take your time. A well-crafted story, no matter how small, can hold remarkable power.