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BUSINESS & LOBBYING

Grassroots campaigns poised to gain by ethics rule changes

By [Jessica Holzer](#)

When Congress reeled in traditional lobbyists in January, it gave a boost to lobby firms and trade associations that specialize in swaying lawmakers by stirring public sentiment in their districts.

Organizations with the capacity to mount such “grassroots” campaigns do not rely on nurturing close ties with lawmakers and rarely lavish them with fancy meals or junkets. As a result, they stand to gain from the separate ethics packages passed by the House and Senate, both of which ban gifts and trips from lobbyists, and a Senate provision to lengthen the time former Capitol Hill staff and lawmakers must wait before they lobby their old colleagues.

But the changes will hardly jolt an industry that lobbyists argue has been moving away from the proverbial handshake and backroom deal for years.

Well before Congress was spurred to action, the spread of the Internet, fax machines, 24-hour cable news, and talk radio had radically shrunk the distance between lawmakers and their constituents, lobbyists say. Under more scrutiny than ever, many lawmakers have already grown deaf to lobbyists who do not muster hard evidence showing support for their position in the home district.

“There’s been an evolution over a 10-year stretch in which relationship lobbying has become relatively ineffective. The members don’t want their actions seen as being affected by relationships with special interests,” said Stewart Hall, a managing director of the Federalist Group, a traditional lobbying firm owned by Ogilvy Public Relations.

“It’s our opinion — and certainly our business strategy — that long before Jack Abramoff, the world was changing,” said Robert Mathias, managing director of Ogilvy in Washington.



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Grassroots lobbying has come a long way since the 1980s, when companies and trade associations deluged lawmakers with identical letters or postcards from constituents. The strategy seemed so synthetic that former Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D-Texas) lampooned it as “Astroturf lobbying.”

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Today, an effective grassroots campaign strives to surround a lawmaker with original communications from constituents and whip up genuine sentiment among voters in the home district. That sentiment must be backed up with numbers.

“[Members] are going to look at you and say, ‘Where’s the polling data?’” according to Hall.

As old-style lobbying has lost its potency, scores of lobbying firms have sold themselves to big public-relations conglomerates with robust grassroots operations in recent years. The Federalist Group put itself on the block in 2005 when it recognized the trend, Hall said.

Meanwhile, independent grassroots firms have seen brisk business as traditional lobby firms have sought to partner with them. **Business has been booming for grassroots specialist Bonner and Associates, according to Jack Bonner, who founded the firm 23 years ago. “The ethics reform will mean more business flowing to grassroots firms than ever before,” he said.**

The shift has not been lost on many trade associations, which have beefed up their grassroots capabilities.

Ben McKay, senior vice president of the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America, said he noticed the change when he joined the group a few years ago: “Gone were the days of the smoke-filled rooms and steak dinners.” Now PCIAA has one of the strongest grassroots capabilities in the insurance industry, he said.

Credit unions have also embraced political advocacy. Roughly eight in 10 said they had a board member or senior staffer contact a legislator in the last month, according to a survey by the National Association of Federal Credit Unions.

BIPAC, one of the most politically active trade groups, delivered more than 1 million communications from employees of its member companies to legislators during the 2006 election cycle.

“We’re actually glad to see a reform that recognizes that grassroots is the truly powerful tool,” said Darrell Shull, the head of BIPAC’s political operations.

Since lobbyists aren’t required to report grassroots campaigns to the federal government, it is difficult to track their growth.

Lobbyists escaped having to disclose their grassroots activities when the Senate in January narrowly approved an amendment to strip

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such a provision from the ethics reform package.

Shull vowed to fight such a change should it arise in the future. “I want to make sure they keep their hands off real constituent communications,” he said.

Compared with old-style relationship lobbying, grassroots campaigns are complex, costly, and require a variety of tactics.

“Trying to find real people has always been inconvenient in Washington,” said Jim Courtovich of Kearsarge Global Advisors, a public-relations firm with a grassroots practice that was formerly known as National Media.

While e-mail or Internet mobilization is the “tactic du jour,” it is not enough to sway lawmakers, Jeffrey Oldham of Direct Impact, the grassroots arm of Ogilvy, argued.

“If you do it all online, that’s Astroturf. You need a phone call from a key person or a unique letter,” he said.

But drafting leaders of institutions — such as local chambers of commerce, senior groups, or newspaper editorial boards — to rally behind a cause is no easy task.

Such people “really want to make sure they understand the issue,” Bonner said. “There’s no high-tech way of doing that.”

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