

BUSINESS & LOBBYING

K Street Insiders: A brave new world on Capitol Hill?

By Dave Wenhold

If you poke your head into any coffee shop, restaurant, or bar on Capitol Hill, you'll hear (and overhear) fervent chatter about lobby reform. Every Washington lobbyist knows his or her business is changing — it's a matter of how and when, rather than if. What are the implications for those who live in a political world, whether it's lawmakers and their staffs or my clients?

For lobbyists, there will be more paperwork and different rules to follow. We will adapt, as we have before. And, as before, 99.9 percent of us will play by the rules. That isn't to say the transition will be a completely smooth one.

Some Americans think lobbyists mislead Congress to get desirable results from themselves and their clients, but I know different. A lobbyist's worth is measured by his or her reliability when supplying lawmakers with the facts underlying an issue. Providing sub-par data, engaging in deceitful practices, or putting a member in an untenable position leads to exile from the lobbying community.

Rather, a lobbyist's job is to bring balance to issues by providing legislators and their staffs with the pros and cons of an idea or action. Lawmakers cannot be experts on every issue — they rely on specialists to parse the minutiae of legislation to make informed votes. With overzealous reform proposals, lawmakers will be cutting out of the legislative process specialists who deliver the detailed information members need to make informed decisions. Any changes in the current working environment should be to improve the system, rather than harm it. Information is power, and lobbyists provide legislators and their staffs with the information they need to make sound policy decisions that are ultimately good for the legislator, their state and this country.

In the 109th Congress alone, more than 10,000 bills and resolutions were introduced (excluding a myriad of agency regulatory changes or compliance issues), according to Thomas.loc.gov. Some actions were simple, such as naming a post office, but others were much less so, touching on such complex concerns as border security, immigration, and small-business healthcare.

Lawmakers and their staffs confront information overload: The volume of communication that a single congressional office receives in any given week is astounding. A recent Congressional Management Foundation study found that Congress receives close to 200 million mail and e-mail contacts in a single year. Add to those communiqués

the millions more phone calls and faxes offices on the Hill receive, and it translates into thousands of communications each week at every congressional office.

How do the staffs and legislators separate the wheat from the chaff? With the advent of point-and-click constituent advocacy, the value of a trusted lobbyist who provides solid information helps those legislators and staffs make educated decisions on vital issues for the country and our fellow citizens.

With the complexities of any significant piece of legislation, at least one (and often more), association, organization, coalition or lobbyist advocates on behalf of or against certain components of most actions. Without the input of credible lobbyists, associations, organizations and John Q. Public, legislators and their staffs would be left to make critical decisions without detailed background information, points and counterpoints or consideration of the economic and political realities to their states. Lawmakers' decisions affect millions of Americans every day, and warrant educated input.

Lobby reform proposals surely will impact our community and, going forward, many direct lobbyists may employ grassroots lobbying techniques or other strategies to supplement their face-to-face work. More than likely, congressional staffers will be meeting more in cafeterias, hallways and in their cramped offices, and will be taxed with cramming more meetings into their day due to the possible future bans on outside meetings.

Members will be able to claim victory by passing a reform package, but most will still rely on the lobbying community for the timely, accurate information they need to make decisions. And, over time, the public outside of the Beltway may come to understand the role we all play in ensuring that all legislative issues have an informed voice on Capitol Hill. We must remember that the First Amendment guarantees the right to free speech and petitioning of Congress for redress of grievances. To quash those rights leads us to a place where the common person, business or association had no voice. Our Founding Fathers understood the importance of that voice and we must be careful, with extreme reform proposals, to not impinge on these inalienable rights of every American to petition our government.

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