

## **Perception of lobbying is not the reality**

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*By Paul Miller*

This week has been one in which all my colleagues and I wish would never have happened. Not because we did anything wrong or even live by the same standards as Jack Abramoff.

It's because of how inaccurately the lobbying profession is portrayed by the media. I'm not here looking for sympathy. What I am asking for is a fair characterization about lobbying and the critical role it plays in our political process.

The media has dubbed Jack Abramoff a "Super Lobbyist" and I'm not quite sure why. As far as I can tell Jack delivered very little to his clients. He did pay reporters to place stories and he was able to get statements placed into the Congressional Record according to reports, but does this justify being labeled a "Super Lobbyist?" I'm not sure what the criteria are for such a fancy title, but if it takes lying, cheating, and stealing from your clients, then I am happy not to be in this category. If everyone wants to get it right, they would dub Mr. Abramoff a "Super Crook" because that's what he is. I'm not even sure you could qualify Jack as a lobbyist.

Lobbyists represent the interests of every American all across the country, from the small rural towns to the big cities.

Yes, that's true. If you were ever a member of the Girl Scouts. If you ever used a library. If you ever rode a snowmobile. If you ever played on a sports team. If you own a gun. If you hunt. If you're 65 or older. If you have done any of these or thousands of other activities in this country, you have been represented at some time by a lobbyist. In other words, anyone young or old or somewhere in the middle has a lobbyist and, in most cases is unaware of it. You could say that lobbying is as American as "mom and apple pie" are to this country. It's not the stereotypical caricature, which is as familiar as the name: portly, cigar-smoking men who wine and dine lawmakers while slipping money into their pockets.

We have all lobbied someone for something during our lifetimes; we just don't consider it lobbying. A child lobbies for higher allowance or for extending his or her curfew. Adults lobby the minute they sign a petition in support of or in protest against something. We just don't think in terms of lobbying when we do these things. This may be a simplistic look at the lobbying profession, but if we are going to change the stereotype of lobbyists as sinister, corrupt individuals, we need to break down what a lobbyist is and does in the simplest of terms so that everyone all across the country understands.

Our founding fathers recognized a legitimate role for un-elected participation in government by conferring a First Amendment right on citizens to petition the government for redress of grievances. Citizens caught up in the demands of day-to-day living delegate these "petition" duties to professionals (or lobbyists).

History has proven that legislators need lobbyists. It's not for the so-called "special interest money", it's for the research and other resources they bring to the table. With over 4,000 bills introduced in the 108th Congress, it's inconceivable that a member or his/her staff could know all the nuances of every bill introduced. It's impossible! This is why the role of a lobbyist is so critical. With so many pieces of legislation and so many different interpretations of this legislation, it's the role of lobbyists on all sides to help members and their staffs weed through it all. It's only at this point that a member can be expected to cast his or her vote in the best interest of his constituents and the country. Without lobbyists, it's scary to think what types of laws would be passed in this country.

Lobbying is a legitimate and necessary part of our democratic political process. Government decisions affect both people and organizations, and information must be provided in order to produce informed decisions. Public officials cannot make fair and informed decisions without considering information from a broad range of interested parties. All sides of an issue must be explored in order to produce equitable government policies. In a nutshell, this is a vital role we play. Without it, members and staff could not be expected to do the "right thing."

Lobbying is also NOT about fancy lunches, expensive suits, or days out on the golf course. Lobbying involves much more than persuading legislators. Its principal elements include researching and analyzing legislation or regulatory proposals; monitoring and reporting on developments; attending congressional or regulatory hearings; working with coalitions interested in the same issues; and educating not only government officials but also employees and corporate officers on the implications of various changes. What most lay people regard as lobbying - the actual communication with government officials - represents the smallest portion of a lobbyist's time. A far greater proportion is devoted to the other aspects of preparation, information and communication.

Like any profession, there are lobbyists who stretch the lines of what is considered ethical and unethical. It's this small group of people who have cast a negative light over our profession as early as 1869. Jack Abramoff happens to be a person who considered himself a lobbyist and one we have to consider as our bad apple. The majority of us do not conduct ourselves or our businesses in this way. We operate ethically and adhere to a code of ethics that we are proud of.

If I can leave you with anything from this article, let it be that lobbyists do serve an important function and, like anything else, we should not rush to judge a profession we may not be familiar with. Lobbyists serve their communities through their numerous charitable works. You don't see these in the headlines because we don't do this work for the press; we do it because it's the right thing to do. And, everyone in this country is represented by a lobbyist. These are important facts to remember before casting judgment on an entire profession because of one man who is not a "Super Lobbyist", but a "Super Crook."

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In addition, Paul serves as President of the American League of Lobbyists, which serves as the national trade association for the lobbying community.