

Lobbying: A Misunderstood Profession

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The term lobbyist dates back to the early 1800's, yet today it is still a profession misunderstood by the public. As the American League of Lobbyists (ALL) celebrates its 25th anniversary, we are committed to increasing professionalism in the lobbying profession. Our mission is for all of us who practice this craft, to spend time this year educating the public, on the value we as lobbyists bring to our legislative, political, and regulatory processes. For too long we have stayed silent on what we do. As President of ALL this year, I'd like to challenge every lobbyist and organization listed in this book to defend their profession when it's attacked and to educate the public on the value we add to our system of government.

Every two years our profession comes under attack. We are blamed for all that is wrong in Washington and throughout the country, as candidates seek out votes from unknowing constituents. Why do candidates do this? The answer is simple – attacking a profession not widely understood by the public not only sells newspapers, but it gets votes. It's only after candidates win the election do they come calling, asking lobbyists to help financially through Political Action Committee contributions or to assist in lobbying for or against a pet project in their state or district. To some politicians, lobbyists are a necessary evil to help them get elected. To the general public, lobbyists are corrupt. This isn't a promising picture of a profession that serves such a valuable role in our process. This is the perception of every lobbyist in Washington and throughout every state capitol. The challenge ALL has from this year forward is to provide better information on what a lobbyist is and does. What role a lobbyist plays in the legislative process. What role a lobbyist plays in the political process. And, what role a lobbyist plays in his or her community.

What is a lobbyist? Lectric Law Library defines a lobbyist as:

A group, organization or association seeking to influence the passage or defeat of legislation. Originally, the term referred to persons frequenting the lobbies or corridors of legislative chambers in order to speak to lawmakers.

The definition of a lobby and the activity of lobbying is a matter of differing interpretation. By some definitions, lobbying is limited to direct attempts to influence lawmakers through personal interviews and persuasion. Under other definitions, lobbying includes attempts at indirect, or 'grassroots,' influence, such as persuading members of a group to write or visit their district's representative and their state's senators, or attempting to create a climate of opinion favorable to a desired legislative goal.

The right to attempt to influence legislation is based on the First Amendment to the Constitution, which says Congress shall make no law abridging the right of the people 'to petition the government for a redress of grievances.'

Despite this constitutional protection there are various restrictions and registration requirements concerning lobbying.

Lobbying as a profession is not a new craft. The term lobbyist came into use in the early 1800's and derives from the location where early lobbyists worked the lobbies of political buildings. As with any profession, things change and evolve over time. Yet, with lobbying, it would seem that the profession has evolved, but the perception of what a lobbyist is or does hasn't changed. It was a misunderstood profession back in the 1800's and the same is true some 205 years later.

One of the misunderstood facts about the lobbying profession is that the individuals and organizations listed in this book - all 17,000 of them - 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.

I was fortunate enough to have been asked two years ago to speak at career day at my nephew's school back in Wisconsin. Like every proud uncle I was flattered to have been asked, but unsure how to explain what I do to a group of kids ranging from second- through eighth-graders. To find out just how much they knew, I asked the question "does anyone know what a lobbyist is?" A couple hands raised, but one in particular caught my eye. It was a young second-grader climbing out of her seat to be called upon. I called on her, and she replied "you're the guy who carries my bags at the hotel." The purpose of telling you this is that regardless of age, I don't think the perception this little girl had of a lobbyist is that far off. I would venture to guess that if you asked 100 random people all across the country the same question, you'd get an array of different answers. Why is this? Well, it is simply that the lobbying community has stayed silent for far too long about the value it brings to our system of government. If we take one lesson away from ALL's 25th anniversary this year it should be that we need to be proud of what we do. We need to stand up for our profession when attacked, and we need to take the time to explain what we do to those "outside the beltway."

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.

In Washington you will hear the word "special interest" used to describe a negative group of people trying to petition its government, usually represented by a lobbyist. My response, "yeah, so what?" A special interest is nothing more than an identified group expressing a point of view - be it colleges and universities; churches; charities; public interest or environmental groups; senior citizens organizations; or even state, local or foreign governments. While most people think of lobbyists only as paid professionals, there are also many independent, volunteer lobbyists - all of whom are protected by the same First Amendment.

Our founding fathers recognized a legitimate role for unelected 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. Its 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. As the premiere trade association representing the lobbying profession, ALL has made it one of its core principles to police itself. To do that, ALL adopted a code of ethics in 1987 that sets the standard of what a lobbyist should be. Members of ALL subscribe to this code and promise to live up to its principles.

There is also a misconception about the work lobbyists do. Many people are led to believe that the work a lobbyist does is secretive. I always smile when I hear someone say that. It’s not because I believe it, it’s because we are so heavily regulated and our dealings so transparent that I can’t believe someone could even say such a thing. Members of ALL have been in the forefront of the changes to the regulations governing the lobbying profession. Most people are unaware that lobbyists register with the government. Lobbyists fill out detailed lobbying disclosure reports that indicate who their clients are, who they are lobbying, how much they are being paid, and what issues they are lobbying for or against. To make things even more transparent, these reports are available to the public through the United States Senate’s web site.

Another fact not known about lobbyists is that they are involved in their communities. In today’s news climate where negative stories sell papers, you won’t find any reports on the good works lobbyists do for charity. ALL members, however, have organized an annual charity basketball game with members of Congress that raises money for children’s charities. In five short years, the ALL Foundation has donated just under \$150,000 to DC children’s programs. This money helps pay for dental exams, eye glasses, and buses to take kids to city events, and helps fund an after-school reading and mentoring pro-

gram. This doesn’t sound like a bad group of people to me. In addition, ALL members collect clothing during its annual Capitol PurSuit drive, which helps those struggling to get back on their feet with a helping hand, which is oftentimes their first interview suit. The goal of this program is to help some talented people who just need a little help getting back into the workforce.

ALL and its members don’t do this work for the publicity and that is why you don’t see us blanketing the media with press releases on our efforts. We do it because it’s the right thing to do. If lobbyists are bad at anything, it’s that we don’t promote our charitable works. For most of us, we are embarrassed being recognized for something that we all should be doing. But, with the profession so misunderstood, I believe that highlighting these efforts is important because it will help the public better understand who we are. Only then can we begin to change the perception of our profession. ALL will once again be spending the year actively involved in the community and urges all lobbyists to join us in this effort. This type of work is important to who we are and how our profession is viewed.

If I can leave you with anything from this introduction to the *Washington Representatives* Book, let it be the following:

- 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;
- Everyone in this country is represented by a lobbyist;
- Members of the American League of lobbyists subscribe to a code of ethics; and
- The lobbying profession is an honorable one and should be seen as such.

So, as we celebrate our profession this year, I challenge each lobbyist to spend time educating the public on the vital role we play in our system of government. Don’t hide from what you do – embrace and celebrate it!

“Everyman owes a part of his time and money to the business or industry in which he is engaged. No man has a mortal right to withhold his support from an organization that is striving to improve conditions within his sphere.” (President Theodore Roosevelt). This quote is something all 17,000 people listed in this book should adhere to. By becoming a member of our professional association, they can help to strengthen their profession and the contributions they make to their organizations, firms and/or clients. If you are a lobbyist, help us help you by joining with us this year and becoming an ALL member.
