



In Closing

THE BUSINESS OF WINNING POLITICS

This year, corporate America will spend an estimated \$2.5 billion dollars to influence federal, state and local public policies and gain access to the multibillion dollar government market for private sector goods and services. After all, legislation and regulation at all levels can significantly impact the bottom line.

But the business community is often outflanked on major public policy issues, at least in terms of communicating with the public. Corporate America is a big target and often seems content to keep its head down and not fire back.

The public remains cynical about the “backroom” world of politics (understandable given the multiple episodes of self-dealing in Washington) and our ability as citizens to impact policy decisions, which may drive down public participation in the political process even further.

In the last few years corporate America has become more understanding of the fact that they and the elected officials who shape public policy and business regulations share a common constituency—the public.

Ultimately, business must better master the art of public affairs to succeed in government affairs. The question is, how can a company communicate strategically, use its internal resources effectively, build strong alliances, and utilize the tactical “toolbox” to play the game of politics – and win?

The public affairs arena has traditionally been dominated by activist interest groups who have learned how to gain and use public support effectively. Anti-business sentiment is prevalent in the blogosphere and even though it is unclear about its eventual impact in the political arena, it certainly warrants attention

But the recent debate on universal health

care generated enough emotion and public activism to conclude that the landscape has changed significantly in the last 12 months. Today the public – particularly political independents and mainstream Americans – may more engaged and ready to impact important policy issues than ever before, presenting an opportunity for businesses to capture that emotion at the grassroots level to advance free market-based policy and usurp the traditional agenda setters.

Corporate America has a tremendous story to tell many levels – as the engine that drives our economy; employing millions of Americans; fueling a tax base that funds governments and its programs at all levels; making millions of dollars in philanthropic contributions to help the less privileged, and allowing employees to perform thousands of hours of volunteer work in our communities.

But the “good story” of corporate America is just not communicated effectively, consistently, nor often enough.

Corporate America can play the high-stakes game of politics more effectively with a guiding strategic communications game plan touching all aspects of their business, and engaging the public proactively, openly and honestly. Enlightened corporate leaders are looking for new ways to engage the public on issues of mutual interest—and do so proactively, rather than reacting to a crisis once the agenda has been imposed on them by others.

The world of public affairs has evolved to encompass a wide variety of disciplines, from strategy and messaging, to advocacy, alliance development and community and public relations, among others. Distinct from public relations, for example, public affairs generally has a political or legislative objective, usually a public policy or regulation.

In terms of advocacy, public affairs professionals seek to make effective use of

public support for ideas, rather than relying solely on the strength of lobbying, or “the inside game,” to move an issue forward. Good corporate citizens have the trust of the community and its leaders and that trust often creates the necessary link to advocate a company’s position successfully or generate public support for a policy issue.

And why is important that companies do this? The traditional, one-track, relationship-only approach to influencing policy and regulation just won’t suffice anymore.

The most sophisticated companies will seek to make stakeholders and the public at large their ally. Such an objective is ambitious and attainable. Building that relationship – particularly one that can be sustained over a period for time – is no easy task.

Corporate America has an opportunity to create a new paradigm, a new environment, one in which companies engage the public, add some “sunshine” to the process, and make the public part of the solution to policy and regulatory challenges.

As a business, it is wise to look closely at the business plan and assess the impact of politics – particularly federal, state and local public policies and regulations - on the bottom line, and establish a long-term strategy for consistent, effective communications with key audiences, most notably the public.

Though such an assessment, companies can begin the process of building a foundation for successful communications throughout the organization and into the public arena - from the ground up. That’s the key to winning politics over the long term.

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