



Government Relations

Own Your Role as "One Who Influences"

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While considering a grassroots code of ethics, it's critical to understand why the need for such a code has arisen, which means examining our past behaviors and current roles. Our job as government relations professionals involves persuading others to our association's viewpoint, which means we must use influence based on long-term relationships, trust, and our prospects' ownership of their decisions.

I have been ruminating about the grassroots ethics discussions taking place among the government relations community and thought it would be helpful, especially for those new to the profession, to remind us of how we arrived at this place where we are now "defending the faith." There are some day-one deviations that, had they been avoided, might have prevented the scrutiny we now experience.

Government relations professionals generally agree we need to demonstrate ethical behavior, including as it relates to volunteer engagement in the political process. It's a good thing when a profession tries to police itself and set professional behavioral standards.

What I find lacking in the discussions about ethics is how we got to this point. Looking back on some past trends can help us understand how to best move forward in an ethical environment.

Own Your Role

First, let's just admit what we are. Government relations professionals aren't healthcare professionals who routinely rank highly in surveys of the most trusted professions. We inhabit the same band of the trust spectrum as attorneys and legislators. The public knows that we get paid to persuade. This doesn't mean that we should abandon all attempts at increasing our credibility, but let's not castigate ourselves over it.

We talk at length about "advocacy," which has a nice ring to it. But the goal of our advocacy activities is to influence. Yes, we are organizers and advocates, but the desired result is to *influence and persuade*.

Embrace Ethical Standards as Influence Tactics

Not all well-meaning efforts to police the profession are what they seem. Now, before you storm my office, I am not opposed to a code of ethics. I just believe we need to think about how these standards can be used.

In a recent workshop my colleague, Dr. Kelton Rhoads, advised us to look at ethics through another lens: "Many people look at ethics as separate from influence tactics ... they see ethics as a way of governing the use of influence. I don't view them separately. Ethical standards can be used as influence tactics. For example, two years ago, 'dissent' was patriotic. Now, according to some of the same voices, dissent at town hall meetings is beyond the pale and bordering on unethical. Witness how the filibuster has changed its ethical skin in the last few years. Whenever one group sets an ethical standard, it's usually for the purpose of limiting the moves on the other side," Rhoads reminds us.

Each side can use "ethics" as the moral high ground. Since each side has a different ethical grounding, the advantage goes to the group setting the rules. Grassroots professionals can use an ethical code as a tactic to try and gain the trust of lawmakers and the public. Lawmakers can demand an ethical code as a way to determine how many communications they receive, who their communications are from, in what form they arrive, and even how we behave in public.

I tend to agree with Bradley Smith, chairman of the Center for Competitive Politics, who wrote in a recent post about legislators and constituent input: "A grassroots campaign is when you like the message; an astroturf campaign is when you don't."

Lobbying professionals have dealt with this issue forever, it seems. When we look at what really matters to the public, "lobbying" hardly registers. For example, a recent survey by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press showed that of more than 21 public policy priorities, "lobbyists" ranked third from the bottom in terms of public concern.

The bottom line? "Keep your eyes open. Ethical standards can be used as a tactic," Rhoads advises.

But how did we get to the point where our well-intentioned efforts to help people engage in the system are being maligned? Let's look in the mirror.

Avoid the "Attitude"

I have trained not just advocates, but hundreds of grassroots and PAC professionals. I can determine their practice philosophy by how they talk about their grassroots volunteers and PAC members.

I will never forget during my third week on the job managing a Fortune 100 corporate grassroots program. I was asked to serve on a panel with other association and corporate insurance professionals and share best practices from our internal grassroots programs.

No fewer than two of the three panelists uttered the word "use" when referring to their grassroots volunteers. They said uninspiring things like, "We *use* our retirees for grassroots when we need a lot of volume because they're not busy," and, "We *use* our members' employees to promote legislation the media doesn't follow because legislators don't hear from anyone else on those issues." You get the idea.

These political involvement professionals really didn't care about their stakeholders; they were a means to an end. Their stakeholders were not individuals whose respect had to be earned; they were tools. There was no ground-up communication, just top-down barking.

How does this relate to ethics? Attitudes such as these have created an aggressive focus on volume. Some grassroots professionals and vendors who serve them created an exaggerated pursuit of numbers, which in some campaigns has led to a common belief by legislative staff that many communications are not generated by actual voters, which has led to mistrust and gridlock.

This pernicious atmosphere became worse with the proliferation of online tools. Everyone started thinking that email volume equaled instant grassroots success. People wrote books about it and castigated those who questioned the over-emphasis on this one influence tactic.

When I asked a group of grassroots professionals if there were firms that did trade in fake grassroots communications, the answer was yesthere were (and still are) vendors that generate "fake" emails. What amazes me is the ethically challenged staff who are aware of such practices and still hire these firms. Any association that hires an unethical firm and engages in such practices will lose all credibility with their influence targets.

Build Your Relationships, and Ethics Comes Naturally

There are a couple of ways you can get someone to do what you ask. There is influence, which is based on long-term relationships, trust, and your prospects' ownership of the decision, or there is coercion via fear and threats. I'll choose influence every time. It's the ethical choice.

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