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How to build a grassroots network

By Amy Showalter
April 24, 2007

Memo to corporate and business leaders who want to wield a bigger stick in the political arena: Start a grassroots employee network. Most politically active companies hire lobbyists and make political contributions. But the most effective companies use politically engaged employee networks to supplement that work and bring their corporate activism to the next level.

The first step is educating your workforce about your company's top legislative priorities. Teach your employees how to lobby their elected officials and create opportunities for them to connect with each other. Invite your congressional member or state legislator to the plant or bring a busload of employees to the statehouse. Don't be like so many other businesses and wait until the summer before the election to organize a voter registration drive. That might make you feel good, but it won't move the needle.

The corporations who developed the models for effective corporate activism were Nationwide and ARCO, now owned by BP. Their civic action programs, also known as CAPs, were conceived in the 1970s by executives who were impressed by the results of rabble rousers and grassroots organizers like Ralph Nader and Saul Alinsky.

Nationwide launched its grassroots network in 1978, and I managed it for nine years. At its peak the network had more than 15,000 members who regularly contacted their federal and state elected officials on issues that affected the industry — and their paychecks. The network also helped Nationwide register more than 10,000 new voters. The network was effective because civic engagement was an ingrained part of the company culture. Voter registration was simply one of many company-endorsed activities we offered to increase their civic engagement.

Southwest Airlines' Network

Southwest Airlines has built one of corporate America's most effective grassroots networks. The low-cost carrier operates an efficient and effective political machine within its nationwide 34,000-employee base. In 2002 that machine proved its mettle when airlines' insurance costs skyrocketed in the wake of 9/11. Southwest lobbyists helped insert language into a bill that required the government to underwrite terrorism insurance. On cue, the Southwest employee network pummeled lawmakers with 13,000 letters urging them to vote for it. The measure was passed in the Homeland Security Act.

Employee grassroots networks are extremely effective on the state level. Lobbying by a grassroots network at Cinergy, a Midwestern utility, helped convince Ohio legislators to pass a law deregulating electricity in 1999. Company officials recall the debate swung in Cinergy's favor after about 90 Cinergy employees representing key legislative districts descended on the capital en masse to meet individually with undecided and wavering legislators.

Cinergy and Duke Energy merged in April, and now the utility is in the midst of creating a grassroots network for the merged company, said John L. Stowell, who created the grass-roots network and is now Duke Energy's vice president for environmental policy. Duke Energy is the nation's third largest burner of coal and, Stowell said, the company needs a grassroots employee network to help educate elected officials about climate change and the prospect of federal regulations limiting greenhouse gases.

The Hardest Part

Building an employee network is time consuming and hard work, but for corporate leaders, the hardest part is trusting employees with the information they need to be effective advocates.

I always find the number of employees who don't understand their company's top legislative priorities to be compelling. When I conduct workshops, I notice a marked difference between senior company leaders and middle managers when it comes to understanding how legislation impacts revenue and jobs.



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That's because too many corporate executives don't take the time to teach employees about the policy issues that determine the company's future. I know this because when I ask executives if their rank-and-file could name the company's top legislative priorities, I usually get a stunned silence.

The good news is that done properly, a legislative action program will teach employees more about the business and help them better understand the validity of management's decisions. The best possible outcome is that the workforce will develop an allegiance to the company's interests.

Finally, don't make the mistake of thinking that employees will agree with the company's positions just because they get a paycheck. Employers have to persuade as well as educate their employees. But there's a bonus: If you take the time to do it the right way, your workforce will understand your decisions better and be more committed to their company's future.

Amy Showalter owns The Showalter Group, Inc., a Cincinnati-based firm that advises trade associations, Fortune 500 companies and nonprofit organizations on how to increase their grassroots and PAC effectiveness.

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