

Showalter & Rhoads: Mistrust Unavoidable in Grass-Roots Efforts

May 11, 2010

By Amy Showalter and Kelton Rhoads
Special to Roll Call

Let's face it: Modern grass-roots campaigning has a black eye.



Grass-roots protesters were blamed when a handful of Members of Congress canceled town hall meetings after angry constituents disrupted them. Some protesters were hauled away by police.

Grass-roots campaigns are vilified for robocalls that spread inaccurate information and, even worse, interrupt dinner.

Meanwhile, examples of fake grass-roots communications continue to turn up. Last August, an employee of a well-known grass-roots lobbying group was fired for sending fake letters to lawmakers that purported to be from nonprofit groups opposed to climate change legislation.

Yes, modern grass-roots campaigns are taking a beating in the court of public opinion — some of it deservedly so. As a result, there is a movement among some people in the profession to police grass-roots organizing and set ethical standards for the profession, but I'd argue that ethics codes can be used as a tactic by those in power to control the rules of the game. Whenever one group calls for an ethical standard, it's usually for the purpose of limiting the moves on the other side.

For example, one of the ethical standards being promoted is that grass-roots organizers have a responsibility to ensure that the communications coming from citizens are relevant to policymakers. Translation: The grass-roots organizer is unethical if his or her volunteers communicate on anything other than what the person in power, the lawmaker, says is relevant to him. To us, that smacks of limits on free speech — perhaps free thought, too. It implies that the legislator's agenda is the agenda, and that we at the grass roots are to respond rather than be proactive.

As I remember, there were some worthy grass-roots movements that were not considered relevant by policymakers at the time, such as the American Revolution, the abolitionist movement and the civil rights movement. Pull the grass roots out of the agenda-setting formula, and you're left with a larger role for the ruling elite and media elite to play. It's undemocratic. The people should be able to set agendas, even if that agenda is "not relevant" as the ruler sees it. It's a cornerstone of our democracy.

The lawmakers who canceled their town hall meetings last fall and this spring as the health care debate raged are one good example of how differently constituent behavior can be viewed. Most of the lawmakers who canceled public meetings said they were acting out of concern for their safety, but plenty of others thought they were ducking a difficult issue. Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) cited "a lynch mob mentality" when he canceled his town hall

meetings during the August recess. Meanwhile, some of the state's other Representatives, who were also subjected to heckling and personal attacks, met with their constituents despite the fuss.

"They aren't protesters," Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) told the Olympian, the newspaper in Washington state's capital. "They are constituents speaking their minds."

The media reported stories about tea party protesters and "anti-government radicals" at town hall meetings who voiced their displeasure over how the health care debate unfolded in Washington, D.C. The truth is that while no grass-roots organizer should condone violence, most of the individuals were simply expressing their First Amendment rights.

Others are decrying the way grass-roots campaigns have embraced social media, asking how lawmakers and their staff members will be able to tell the real grass-roots campaigns from "AstroTurf" campaigns.

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: "It has always struck me that if a member of Congress couldn't figure out if there was an organized effort to generate letters, calls, emails and such on an issue, he or she probably had no business being in Congress. Once the Representative has figured that out, it's simple: a grass-roots campaign is when you like the message; an AstroTurf campaign is when you don't."

I assume all thoughtful political involvement professionals agree that we need to demonstrate ethical behavior, including as it relates to volunteer engagement in the political process. However, no matter how many smart, nice, articulate people are in the business, we are not in a profession that will naturally enjoy respect and admiration. This doesn't mean that we should abandon all attempts at increasing our credibility, but let's not castigate ourselves over it. We inhabit the same band of the trust spectrum as attorneys and legislators. The public knows that we get paid to persuade. A grass-roots code of ethics that stifles free speech won't change that.

Amy Showalter is an expert on best practices for the political action committee and grass-roots influence professions. Reach her at amy@showaltergroup.com. Kelton Rhoads is an influence consultant based in Los Angeles and an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism.

2010 © Roll Call Inc. All rights reserved.

