

Public Relations' Role in Manufacturing Artificial Grass Roots Coalitions

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When a corporation wants to oppose environmental regulations, or support an environmentally damaging development, it may do so openly and in its own name. But it is far more effective to have a group of citizens or experts -- and preferably a coalition of such groups -- which can publicly promote the outcomes desired by the corporation while claiming to represent the public interest. When such groups do not already exist, the modern corporation can pay a public relations firm to create them.

The use of such 'front groups' enables corporations to take part in public debates and government hearings behind a cover of community concern. These front groups lobby governments to legislate in the corporate interest, to oppose environmental regulations, and to introduce policies that enhance corporate profitability. Front groups also campaign to change public opinion, so that the markets for corporate goods are not threatened and the efforts of environmental groups are defused. Merrill Rose, executive, vice president of the public relations firm Porter/Novelli, advises companies:

Put your words in someone else's mouth... There will be times when the position you advocate, no matter how well framed and supported, will not be accepted by the public simply because you are who you are. Any institution with a vested commercial interest in the outcome of an issue has a natural credibility barrier to overcome with the public, and often with the media.(FN1)

The names of corporate front groups are carefully chosen to mask the real interests behind them but they can usually be identified by their funding sources, membership and who controls them. Some front groups are quite blatant, working out of the offices of public relations firms and having staff of those firms on their boards of directors. For example, the Council for Solid Waste Solutions shares office space with the Society of the Plastic Industry Inc., and the Oregon Lands Coalition works out of the offices of the Association of Oregon Industries.(FN2)

Corporate front groups have flourished in the United States, with several large companies donating money to more than one front group. In 1991 Dow Chemical was contributing to ten front groups, including the Alliance to Keep Americans Working, the

Alliance for Responsible CFC Policy, the American Council on Science and Health, Citizens for a Sound Economy and the Council for Solid Waste Solutions. According to Mark Megalli and Andy Friedman in their report on corporate front groups in America, oil companies Chevron and Exxon were each contributing to nine such groups. Other companies which donate to multiple groups include Mobil, DuPont, Amoco, Ford, Philip Morris, Pfizer, Monsanto and Procter and Gamble.(FN3) These large corporations "stand to profit handsomely by linking their goals with what they hope to define as a grassroots populist movement."(FN4)

The use of front groups to represent industry interests in the name of concerned citizens is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the past, businesses lobbied governments directly and put out press releases in their own names or those of their trade associations. The rise of citizen and public interest groups, including environmental groups, has reflected a growing scepticism among the public about statements made by businesses:

Thus, if Burger King were to report that a Whopper is nutritious, informed consumers would probably shrug in disbelief.... And if the Nutrasweet Company were to insist that the artificial sweetener aspartame has no side effects, consumers might not be inclined to believe them, either.... But if the 'American Council on Science and Health' and its panel of 200 'expert' scientists reported that Whoppers were not so bad, consumers might actually listen.... And if the 'Calorie Control Council' reported that aspartame is not really dangerous, weight-conscious consumers might continue dumping the artificial sweetener in their coffee every morning without concerns.(FN5)

The American Council on Science and Health has received funds from food processing and beverage corporations including Burger King, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, NutraSweet and Nestlé USA, as well as chemical, oil and pharmaceutical companies such as Monsanto, Dow USA, Exxon, Union Carbide and others. Its executive director, portrayed in the mass media as an independent scientist, defends petrochemical companies, the nutritional values of fast foods, and the safety of saccharin, pesticides and growth hormones for dairy cows. She claims that the U.S. government spends far too much on investigating unproven health risks such as dioxin and pesticides because of the public's "unfounded fears of man-made chemicals and their perception of these chemicals as carcinogens."(FN6)

The American Council on Science and Health is one of many corporate front groups which allow industry-funded experts to pose as independent scientists to promote corporate causes. Chemical and nuclear industry front groups with scientific sounding names publish pamphlets that are 'peer reviewed' by industry scientists rather than papers in established academic journals.(FN7) Megalli and Friedman point out: "Contrary to their names, these groups often disregard compelling scientific evidence to further their viewpoints, arguing that pesticides are not harmful, saccharin is not carcinogenic, or that global warming is a myth. By sounding scientific, they seek to manipulate the public's trust."(FN8)

MANUFACTURING GRASS ROOTS

Front groups are not the only way in which corporate interests can be portrayed as coinciding with a greater public interest. Public relations firms are becoming proficient at helping their corporate clients convince key politicians that there is broad support for

their environmentally damaging activities or their demands for looser environmental regulations. Using specially tailored mailing lists, field officers, telephone banks and the latest in information technology, these firms are able to generate hundreds of telephone calls and/or thousands of pieces of mail to key politicians, creating the impression of wide public support for their client's position.

This sort of operation was almost unheard of ten years ago, yet in the U.S. today, where "technology makes building volunteer organizations as simple as writing a check," it has become "one of the hottest trends in politics" and an \$800 million industry. It is now a part of normal business for corporations and trade associations to employ one of the dozens of companies that specialize in these strategies to run grassroots campaigns for them. Firms and associations utilizing such services include Philip Morris, Georgia Pacific, the Chemical Manufacturers Association, General Electric, American Forest & Paper Association, Chevron, Union Carbide, Procter & Gamble, American Chemical Society, American Plastics Association, Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association, WMX Technologies, Browning Ferris Industries and the Nuclear Energy Institute.(FN9)

When a group of U.S. electric utility companies wanted to influence the Endangered Species Act, which was being re-authorized to ensure that economic factors were considered when species were listed as endangered, their lawyers advised them to form a broad-based coalition with a grassroots orientation: "Incorporate as a non-profit, develop easy-to-read information packets for Congress and the news media and woo members from virtually all walks of life. Members should include Native American entities, county and local governments, universities, school boards... ." As a result of this advice the National Endangered Species Act Reform Coalition was formed, one of a "growing roster of industry groups that have discovered grassroots lobbying as a way to influence environmental debates."(FN10)

Artificially created grassroots coalitions are referred to in the industry as 'astroturf' (after a synthetic grass product). Astroturf is a "grassroots program that involves the instant manufacturing of public support for a point of view in which either uninformed activists are recruited or means of deception are used to recruit them."(FN11) According to Consumer Reports magazine, those engaging in this sort of work can earn up to \$500 "for every citizen they mobilize for a corporate client's cause."(FN12)

Mario Cooper, senior vice president of PR firm Porter/Novelli, says that the challenge for a grassroots specialists is to create the impression that millions of people support their client's view of a particular issue, so that a politician can't ignore it; this means targeting potential supporters and targeting 'persuadable' politicians. He advises: "Database management companies can provide you with incredibly detailed mailing lists segmented by almost any factor you can imagine."(FN13) Once identified, potential supporters have to be persuaded to agree to endorse the corporate view being promoted.

Specialists in this form of organizing use opinion research data to "identify the kinds of themes most likely to arouse key constituent groups, then gear their telemarketing pitches around those themes."(FN14) Telephone polls, in particular, enable rapid feedback so that the pitch can be refined: "With phones you're on the phones today, you analyze your results, you can change your script and try a new thing tomorrow. In a three-day program you can make four or five different changes, find out what's really working, what messages really motivate people, and improve your response rates."(FN15) Focus groups also help with targeting messages.

Demographic information, election results, polling results and lifestyle clusters can all be combined to identify potential supporters by giving information about people's age, income, marital status, gender, ethnic background, the type of car they drive and the type of music they like. These techniques, which were originally developed for marketing products to selected audiences, are now used to identify likely political attitudes and opinions. In this way the coalition builders don't have to waste their time on people who are unlikely to be persuaded, and at the same time can use different arguments for different types of people.

Jack Bonner of Bonner & Associates is one of the leading specialists providing grassroots support for his clients, who include the Association of International Auto Manufacturers, Chrysler, Dow Chemical, Edison Electric Institute, Ford, General Motors, Exxon, McDonnell Douglas, Monsanto, Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, Philip Morris, US Tobacco Co. and Westinghouse.(FN16) When the amendments to the Clean Air Act were being debated in 1990, Bonner managed to get some large citizen groups, who had no financial interest in the matter, to lobby against amendments which would have required car manufacturers to make their cars more fuel efficient.

Bonner's firm, working on behalf of the automobile industry, persuaded these citizen groups that the legislation would have meant that large vehicles would not be manufactured. "Bonner's fee, which he coyly described as somewhere between \$500,000 and \$1 million, was for scouring six states for potential grassroots voices, coaching them on the 'facts' of the issue, paying for the phone calls and plane fares to Washington and hiring the hall for a joint press conference."(FN17)

The Society for the Plastics Industry hired Bonner after a law was passed in 1987 in Suffolk County, New York, banning some plastic products which were filling up landfills. The law was expected to be the first of many in other parts of the U.S. The Society also challenged the law in the courts. Subsequently the law, which had been approved with a twelve to six vote, was suspended with a twelve to six vote by the same body.(FN18)

Bonner's Washington D.C. office has three hundred phone lines and a sophisticated computer system. His staff phone people all over the country, looking for citizens who will support corporate agendas. He targets members of Congress who are unsure of how to vote or who need a justification for voting with industry against measures that will protect the environment.

Imagine Bonner's technique multiplied and elaborated in different ways across hundreds of public issues and you may begin to envision the girth of this industry. Some firms produce artfully designed opinion polls, more or less guaranteed to yield results that suggest public support for the industry's position. Some firms specialize in coalition building -- assembling dozens of hundreds of civic organizations and interest groups in behalf of lobbying goals... This is democracy and it costs a fortune.(FN19)

Another expert in creating grassroots support for corporations is John Davies, who features a picture of an old lady carrying a sign "Not in my backyard" in his advertisements. The picture is captioned:

Don't leave your future in her hands. Traditional lobbying is no longer enough. Today numbers count. To win in the hearing room, you must reach out to create grassroots support. To outnumber your opponents, call the leading grassroots public affairs communications specialists.(FN20)

In his promotion, Davies explains that he will use mailing lists and computer databases to identify potential supporters and telemarketers to persuade them to agree to have letters written on their behalf. In this way he is able to create the impression of a "spontaneous explosion of community support for needy corporations."(FN21)

The practical objective of letter-writing campaigns is not actually to get a majority of the people behind a position and to express themselves on it -- for it would be virtually impossible to whip up that much enthusiasm -- but to get such a heavy, sudden outpouring of sentiment that lawmakers feel they are being besieged by a majority. The true situation may be quite the contrary.(FN22)

Other less specialist firms also create such coalitions for their clients. Edelman PR Worldwide has created such a coalition for Monsanto to oppose the labeling of genetically engineered food. Burson-Marsteller, one of the world's largest public relations firms, also organizes grassroots coalitions and corporate front groups for many of its clients. Since 1985 it has had a team of people in its Washington, D.C. office specializing in designing coalitions to build allies and neutralize opponents. In 1992 Burson-Marsteller created an independent grassroots lobbying unit, Advocacy Communications Team, to counter activists that threaten corporations by organizing "rallies, boycotts and demonstrations outside your plant."(FN23)

Burson-Marsteller used their grassroots lobbying unit to create the National Smokers Alliance in 1993 on behalf of Philip Morris. The millions supplied by Philip Morris and the advice supplied by Burson-Marsteller's Advocacy Communications Team allowed this 'grassroots' alliance to use full-page advertisements, direct telemarketing and other high-tech campaign techniques to build its membership to a claimed three million by 1995, and to disseminate its prosmoking message. The Alliance's president is the vice president of Burson-Marsteller, and other Burson-Marsteller executives are actively involved in the Alliance.(FN24)

Burson-Marsteller is heavily involved in similar activities on behalf of clients who have been threatened by the rise of environmentalism. It helped create the Coalition for Clean and Renewable Energy, organized to support its client Hydro Quebec, which was embroiled in controversy with environmentalists over its dams, both existing and proposed.

The masquerade is part of the game. B-M and companies like it have become masters of manipulation. If a pro-utility group calls itself by a nice, greensounding name, if speakers at public forums are not identified as being on the Hydro Quebec payroll, and if supposed activists are really moles for the opposition, image triumphs and truth becomes a casualty.(FN25)

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Rose, Merrill. 1991. 'Activism in the 90s: Changing Roles for Public Relations', *Public Relations Quarterly* 36 (3):28-32.
- 2 Megalli, Mark, and Andy Friedman. 1991. *Masks of Deception: Corporate Front Groups in America*, Essential Information, p. 4, Stapleton, Richard. 1992. 'Green vs. Green', *National Parks*, Nov/Dec. 32-37, p. 35.
- 3 Megilli and Friedman, pp. 184-5.
- 4 Poole, William. 1992. 'Neither Wise nor Well', *Sierra*, Nov/Dec. 59-61, 88-93.
- 5 Megilli and Friedman, p. 3.
- 6 Bleifuss, Joel. 1995c. 'Science in the Private Interest: Hiring Flacks to Attack the Facts', *PR Watch* 2 (1):11-12. Anon. 1994. 'Public Interest Pretenders', *Consumer Reports* 59(5), p. 319. Anon. 1987a. 'Misguided Health Priorities Could Affect Economy', *International Insurance Monitor* 41 (6):16-17. Anon. 1987b. 'Dr. Blasts US Health Care Priorities', *Cash Flow* 91 (47):28-29.
- 7 Bleifuss, 1995c, p. 11.
- 8 Megalli and Friedman, p. 3.
- 9 Faucheux, Ron. 1995. 'The Grassroots Explosion', *Campaigns & Elections* 16 (1), pp. 20-1, 26-30.
- 10 Carney, Eliza Newlin. 1992. 'Industry Plays the Grassroots Card', *National Journal* 24 (5), p. 281.
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- 12 Anon. 1994i, p. 318.
- 13 Cooper, Mario H. 1993-4. 'Winning in Washington: From Grasstops to Grassroots', *Public Relations Quarterly* 38 (4):13-15.
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- 18 Grefe, Edward A., and Marty Linsky. 1995. *The New Corporate Activism: Harnessing the Power of Grassroots Tactics for Your Organization*, McGraw-Hill, New York, p. 214-5.
- 19 Greider, 1992, p. 39.
- 20 Quoted in Stauber and Rampton 1995/96, p. 18.
- 21 Stauber and Rampton 1995/96, pp. 23-24.
- 22 Sherrill, Robert. 1990. *Why They Call it Politics: A Guide to America's Government*, 5th ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, p. 376.
- 23 Auerbach, Stuart. 1995. 'PR Gets Entrenched as a Washington Business', *The Washington Post*, 18 February 1, p. 19 Bleifuss, 1995a, pp. 2, 6. Nelson, Joyce. 1993b. 'Burson-Marsteller, Pax Trilateral, and the Brundtland Gang vs. the Environment', *The New Catalyst* (26):1-3, p. 9.
- 24 Stauber and Rampton 1995b.

25 Dillon, John. 1993. 'PR Giant Burson-Marsteller Thinks Global, Acts Local: Poisoning the Grassroots', *CovertAction* (44), 30-38.