

Government Relations

In the country, government includes federal, state, county and local municipalities that provide programs and services. It is difficult to find any aspect of our lives that are untouched by government activity.

In fact, many companies, especially in industries that are highly regulated, have their own government relations departments. Their primary functions are to:

- gather information/monitor government
- disseminate management's views
- cooperate with government on mutually beneficial projects
- motivate employees to participate in the political process

Part of the public relations specialist's job is to monitor government. This means keeping track of what legislative bodies and regulatory agencies are doing and discussing. So a corporation or industry can plan ahead and adjust policies or provide information to government bodies that can help influence policy.

Three types of government relations' activities are lobbying, grassroots lobbying and elections.

Lobbying

Direct lobbying This type of lobbying involves a person telling his views to someone directly involved with developing legislation. A government employee, staff member or legislator are those with whom you should communicate your views. It is closely aligned with government relations. A lobbyist directs his or her activity to influence voting on legislation or other decisions made by government officials.

For example, lobbyists can represent varying organizations against each other on a single issue. For national energy legislation, the lobbying interests include automakers, oil companies, coal producers, electric utilities, and others.

The public perceives that only big business lobbies, but a lot of special interests do it. *Fortune* magazine ranked the top 25 lobbying groups in Washington D.C. in terms of influence.

The top five were the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the National Federation of Independent Business, the National Rifle Association and the AFL---CIO.

Another type of lobbying that concerns public relations is Grassroots Lobbying.

Grassroots Lobbying

Grassroots lobbying, sometimes called indirect lobbying, is an 800---million--- dollar industry. There are virtually no rules or regulations governing grassroots lobbying. The direct lobbying we just discussed requires lobbyists to be registered and is heavily regulated.

Grassroots lobbying focuses on raising awareness of a particular cause at the local level, with the intention of reaching the legislature and making a difference in the decision---making process.

It is different from direct lobbying because it asks the public to contact legislators about the issues as opposed to conveying the message to the legislator directly. Companies, associations and citizens take part in grassroots lobbying to influence legislation.

The tools of grassroots lobbying are;

- advocacy advertising
- toll---free phone lines
- bulk faxing
- websites
- bulk email

These are aimed at getting the public to call or write to Senate, Parliament or government agencies.

Grassroots lobbying also involves coalition building. The basic idea is to get people with no financial interest in an issue to speak out on behalf of it.

One company specializing in grassroots lobbying is Bonner and Associates. It has a communication system that has banks of telephones and computers that can call or send letters to thousands of citizens within hours. These citizens then write or call the regulators to influence legislation.

An example of Bonner and Associates' campaigns involved an auto pollution bill that was being considered by Congress. The auto companies opposing the bill sought help from Bonner.

Legislators began to hear from the disabled and the elderly who were afraid, car makers would make cars too small for their wheelchairs and from little league parents worried that fuel---efficient station wagons wouldn't carry a whole team. The bill was defeated.

There are critics of grassroots lobbying.

Critics say that since the public feedback is built and not spontaneous, grassroots lobbying slips into unethical behavior. Much grassroots lobbying is done under cover of front groups. This is what is called **Stealth lobbying**, because the public is not told what vested interests are behind a particular campaign.

The book *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics* by Dennis Wilcox and Glen Cameron gives a good example of stealth lobbying.

The firm APCO Associates organized Mississippians for a Fair Legal System to get public support for tort reform. What people didn't know was that the interests behind this group included large tobacco and chemical companies. They wanted legislation limiting liability for dangerous or defective products.

A third type of government relations is Election Campaigns.

Election Campaigns

During election years, fund---raisers, political strategists, speechwriters and communication consultants are mobilized to help candidates win elections.

American---style campaigning is the most expensive in the world. Everything from paid advertising, to chartered planes, trains, buses, hotels, banners and telecommunications are major expenses of candidates.

In addition to working on behalf of candidates, PR people work within the government.

Public Affairs

Many public relations people work in government public affairs. This means that they communicate for the government.

Some is focused on providing information to people about the programs and services available to them. In a democracy, public information is crucial if citizens are to make informed judgments about the activities and policies of their elected representatives.

Historically, there has been some semantic confusion. Corporations used to call their activities government relations, but it's not called public affairs. Public affairs is the term for all US government agencies and departments.

There are 8 public affairs activities:

1. Fact Finding—information gathering/monitoring what's going
2. Coalition Building—organize groups with a common interest in passing or defeating legislation
3. Direct Lobbying—Overt Advocacy through contact with those who influence passage or defeat of a bill
4. Grassroots Activities—mobilizing support at state or local level
5. Political Action Committees—provide funds to candidates for federal office
6. Political Education Activities—corporations politicizing employees. Getting employees to help lobby for legislation favorable to a corporation
7. Communication on Political Issues—Corporations use advocacy advertising & targeted communication such as direct mail focused on leaders and special audiences
8. Political Support Activities— support is offered to candidates or incumbents, such as media training or expertise for fundraising events

The U.S. military is in a category of its own:

- There is a tremendous number of lives involved
- It's difficult to communicate during times of war
- Safety of soldiers is involved—can't give away military strategies & positions
- The military tries to justifying why it is there

Going back to groups lobbying for legislation, a great example is Oceana. As a non--profit organization, Oceana's goal is protecting the world's oceans.

The ability to use symbols that have inherent emotional value goes a long way toward giving public policy debate a fighting chance.

In this example, dolphins, whales and other ocean animals were under attack by some members of Congress who wanted to remove a key timeline—the Dolphin Deadline—from the Marine Mammals Protection Act.

The Act was designed to protect marine mammals from harmful activities such as commercial fishing. There was a requirement that commercial fisheries reduce the killing and injury of marine mammals to insignificant levels.

Congress set a reasonable goal for this to occur, but the deadline passed without the goal having been reached. Instead of working harder to enforce the deadline, some members of Congress wanted to eliminate it from the act.

Over a three---year period, several attempts had been made to eliminate the Dolphin Deadline. Oceana had been successful in keeping this from happening, but in 2006 the biggest challenge came.

The Congress was Republican---controlled and the prospects of achieving an environmental victory in this Congress were slim.

So Oceana was prepared with a strategic plan to save Flipper. “Flipper” was a television show in the U.S. about a dolphin during the 1960s. Since that time, a few movies about Flipper have been made, and for many Americans, the Flipper character held special emotional ties.

Oceana capitalized on this emotional connection in its campaign.

According to the book *Public Relations Cases*, by Jerry Hendrix and Darrell Hayes, Oceana developed three PR strategies:

1. Increase the visibility of the Dolphin Deadline issue and differentiate it from the clutter.
2. Show strong voter/constituent support for protecting the Dolphin Deadline with the slogan that “A vote for the bill is a vote to kill Flipper.”
3. Demonstrate that protecting the Dolphin Deadline has important policy implications.

Oceana’s communication tactics were varied, ranging from news releases to events created to draw attention.

Oceana:

- developed a Dolphin Deadline brochure and outreach kit
- used billboards and newspaper ads in key Congressmen’s home media; displayed ads on the Washington D.C. metro subway trains to brand and create the issue.
- Conducted media outreach to key outlets in Washington and selected Congressional districts.
- Brought the Dolphin Brigade to Capitol Hill to ask Congress to protect the Dolphin Deadline. The Dolphin Brigade was a group of lobbyists dressed as dolphins—they commuted to Capitol Hill on the Metro; stopped for coffee at Starbucks, read the newspaper and then held a news conference.
- Organized phone banks in key Congressional districts for grassroots lobbying

- Issued a report “Pointless Peril: Deadlines and Death counts, on the results of Oceana’s scientific work, which showed that during the previous 5 years almost 10,000 dolphins could have been saved had the deadline been enforced.

The result was a win. In 2006, Congress passed legislation amending the Marine Mammal Protection Act, but removing language that would have eliminated the Dolphin Deadline.

The Oceana campaign won the Public Relations Society of America’s Silver Anvil Award for the best PR campaign of the year. This is the highest award made by the PRSA.

Conclusion

In summary, Government Relations includes Direct lobbying, indirect lobbying, election campaigns, and public affairs in government. The campaigns are conducted like they are in all other areas of public relations, following a RACE model.