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Grass-Roots Mobilization, by Corporate America

By EDWARD T. WALKER AUG. 10, 2012

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BRUCE YANDLE, an expert on regulation, once used the phrase “bootleggers and Baptists” to describe unlikely political coalitions that form for mutual advantage. Baptists support blue laws that require bars and liquor stores to close on Sundays, the story goes, while bootleggers favor the same regulation, so they can make a profit. Tacit coordination benefits each side, and the virtuous Baptists provide moral cover for bootleggers’ business.

The conservative activists who followed Mike Huckabee’s call to take part in the Chick-fil-A appreciation day last week played the pious Baptists to the corporate bootleggers at Chick-fil-A, the fast-food chain that has been surrounded by controversy because of its conservative president’s opposition to same-sex marriage. While news reports indicate that the event was coordinated by Mr. Huckabee and other conservative leaders, not by the company, both parties benefited from the display of apparently spontaneous grass-roots right-wing activism. Conservatives flexed their political muscle, while the company (which closes on Sundays) enjoyed a record sales day.

The use (or co-optation) of grass-roots politics is a remarkable facet of the new politics of the contemporary corporation.

In a time when companies are particularly sensitive to protest groups, threats of boycott and accusations of corporate irresponsibility, corporations need grass-roots support, or at the least the appearance of it, to defend their reputations and ability to make profits. In 2004, the casino chain Harrah's created a coalition, Winning Together, "to organize Harrah's employees and vendors into a grass-roots network." When for-profit colleges were faced with tough questions about student debt and low graduation rates, they created Students for Academic Choice, a seemingly grass-roots organization led by students promoting the benefits of "postsecondary career-oriented institutions."

Earlier this year, film and television studios activated their Creative America network as a grass-roots organization uniting industry employees against online theft of creative works. (They were unsuccessful; legislation to stop online piracy was scuttled after Internet interests like Wikipedia and Google mobilized users to protest the bills as being overly vague and a danger to free speech.)

Sometimes, companies stand by the wayside and rely on the tacit support of ideological groups. This was evidently the case with Chick-fil-A, and it appears to have been the case also for health insurers that benefited indirectly from the "town hall" protests in 2009 over President Obama's health care legislation.

But these tacit coalitions are rare and fortuitous. Businesses often need to manufacture their own Baptists.

Today, business interests are involved in many efforts to partner with citizen advocacy groups as a corporate tool beyond conventional lobbying. They hire consultants to help them to organize. I estimate, based on my studies of "grass-roots lobbying firms" since the early 1970s, that this subspecialty of corporate lobbying is now a $1 billion-a-year industry. These practices have become well established; since the 1970s, the Public Affairs Council, the association of public affairs officers from many of the world's largest corporations from Dow to Disney, has held an annual National Grassroots Conference.

As business has become more politically mobilized and as the field of citizen advocacy organizations has expanded since the 1970s, corporations and industry groups have become much more active in financing pro-corporate activists. This is evident today in efforts ranging from Americans Against Food Taxes (the soda industry) to Citizens for Fire Safety (manufacturers of flame-retardant chemicals). They have exploited communication tools from e-mail to phone banks to social media to stir the sentiments of an increasingly partisan public with strong opinions on issues like taxation and environmental regulations. Their efforts are not just aimed at conservative activists; Walmart, for instance, developed a "New York Community Action Network" comprising African-American community leaders, low-income residents and labor groups as part of its effort to open a store in the city. While unsuccessful thus far, similar strategies helped Walmart open stores in Washington and Chicago.

I estimate that 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies use grass-roots-mobilization consultants. Many are independent agencies founded by former political campaign professionals searching for revenue during electoral off years, deploying their voter outreach skills to help companies win. Others are branches of large public-relations conglomerates. Businesses hire these consultants most often when facing protest or controversy, and highly regulated industries appear to be some of the heaviest users of their services.

Today, for instance, anyone turning on a TV or radio might easily face ads from the American Petroleum Institute's Vote4Energy campaign or the natural gas industry's mobilization to defend the controversial drilling practice known as hydraulic fracturing. The Durbin Amendment's cap on debit card fees prompted Visa and Bank of America to support a grass-roots campaign through the Electronic Payments Coalition. Tobacco firms are behind Citizens for Tobacco Rights, just as they supported the National Smokers' Alliance two decades ago. Pro-tobacco campaigns often fail, but not always: in California, tobacco-related groups spent almost $47 million to defeat a June ballot measure that would have imposed new cigarette taxes to pay for cancer research.

Occupy Wall Street and other leftist groups have shed valuable light on the lobbying activities by big business in Washington, but their worries might be

misdirected. As companies have adopted the tactics of protest groups, their influence today can be felt in the streets, not just the suites.

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