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Grass-Roots Advocacy: A New Medium For the Message

By John Cochran, CQ Staff

From its quirky boarding system, in which passengers line up for seats, to its irreverent in-flight announcements — “There may be 50 ways to leave your lover, but there are only six ways off this aircraft” — Southwest Airlines has built a loyal following among the nation’s travelers. Dodging competitors, the company in essence created its own industry by using secondary airports instead of major fields, flying direct from city to city rather than through mega-hubs and selling low-price tickets through its own agents rather than travel services.

So last year, when Southwest launched a lobbying campaign to persuade Congress that it should lift restrictions on long-distance flights from one of those airports — Love Field in Dallas, the airline’s birthplace and headquarters — the company engaged its passengers in that effort, too, and called it “Set Love Free.” The airline’s pitch to the public is that by helping the airline expand, they would increase competition and lower airfares.

Southwest bought ads, rented billboards, strung banners over boarding gates and even handed out cocktail napkins printed with the campaign slogan — all directing people to a Web site, setlovefree.com. At the site, customers can register, read corporate polemics on the Love Field issue, alert their local newspapers and TV stations to the gravity of the case, and send e-mail to their members of Congress.

In effect, Southwest passengers became Southwest lobbyists.

“We really feel like the public is going to push this effort over the top,” said Susan Goodman, a Southwest lobbyist who is in charge of grass-roots advocacy. “The more pressure we can get from constituents on legislators, the better chance we’ve got.”

Southwest and other companies, trade associations and interest groups are increasingly using the Internet to reach beyond the Beltway and traditional lobbying techniques to bring more voices to bear on Congress. Technology has made it faster, cheaper and easier for companies and interest groups to enlist employees, customers and sometimes the general public in their causes, creating new, more impressive-looking coalitions that might have taken months or years to assemble in the days of postcards and phone banks.

Ophthalmologists, for instance, used the Internet to help mobilize military veterans for a campaign to stop the Department of Veterans Affairs from allowing optometrists, who are not



FLYING HIGH: Southwest Airlines employees rallied in Dallas last July for the company’s lobbying campaign against flight restrictions at Love Field. (SOUTHWEST AIRLINES PHOTO)

physicians, to do laser eye surgery in VA facilities.

Dealers in herbal remedies and dietary supplements have been signing up their customers as online activists to defend the controversial products from government regulation.



A Hill Covered in E-Mail

Major organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Medical Association and the Business Roundtable have invested millions developing databases of like-minded people who can be marshaled at a moment's notice to flood Congress with e-mails or phone calls on any issue the groups consider vital.

"I'm just a mouthpiece," said Bruce Josten, executive vice president and chief lobbyist for the Chamber. "It's what's behind me. The real influence game here is if I can get 200 of your constituents to contact you, or 300 or 400. These are people who will pull a lever to decide if you're going to be elected or not. You're not going to ignore them. You can't afford to ignore them."

Groups that can demonstrate a broad base of support will be more welcome among members of Congress trying to show, in the wake of the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal, that they are not beholden to corporate or other influence. And that, in turn, makes Internet organizing even more attractive to the lobbying industry.

"This is one of the outcomes of the Abramoff scandal that should be very positive," said Doug Pinkham, president of the Public Affairs Council, an organization for lobbyists and public affairs professionals that has been closely tracking use of technology for grass-roots advocacy. "Input from constituents ought to trump campaign contributions or a personal friendship with a well-connected lobbyist."

Grass-roots organizing has always been "the ultimate advocacy weapon," said Dirk Van Dongen, president of the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors. But it has changed since he first came to Washington years ago, when grass-roots meant expensive and time-consuming mailings, long waits for a response and no reliable way of tracking how many people actually wrote or called Congress as a result.

A Lot of Noise

Even though Internet organizing has grown rapidly since it was first pioneered by activists a decade ago, it is not magic. Southwest Airlines reports that its Set Love Free campaign and Web site have generated "several hundred thousand" e-mails to Congress.

The campaign has helped feed a debate in Texas and Washington over Love Field and airline competition. Lawmakers have introduced bills to remove the long-distance flight restrictions that Congress imposed on Love Field, and by extension Southwest Airlines, in 1979 as a way to protect the newer Dallas-Fort Worth International. But the restrictions remain in place, and opponents of lifting them in Texas, including the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, have started their own Internet campaign called "Keep DFW Strong."

The downside of these kinds of efforts, of course, is that the sheer volume can end up seeming like just a lot of noise, and lose meaning in the process. Congress is already being

overwhelmed with the electronic data and mail. In 2004, House and Senate offices received nearly 201 million messages, 90 percent of them e-mail, according to a recent study by the nonpartisan Congressional Management Foundation. The volume had increased fourfold since 1995.

That torrent of e-mail puts congressional aides in a tough position, torn between their suspicions that mass e-mails are bogus and their desire to respond to constituents, said Rick Shapiro, executive director of the foundation, which trains congressional staff.

As their in-boxes fill up, members of Congress and their staffs have a hard time figuring out exactly who is sending some of the mail, what groups might be organizing the onslaught and how genuine the grass-roots "movement" really is. They also don't know who is paying for the efforts and how much is being spent on them. Groups engaged in grass-roots organizing and lobbying are not required to disclose such information.

"We just know this has been a huge growth area in recent years," said Fred Wertheimer, president of the political watchdog group Democracy 21. He thinks that spending on grass-roots lobbying now could well exceed the cost of direct advocacy.

For trade groups and other interests, meanwhile, the challenge becomes how to break through the babble to make their voices heard. For that, say experts in the field, sincerity rules, as it always has.

Without a compelling message, carefully targeted, from credible and compelling messengers, the e-mail will wash over Congress without effect. Technology, lobbying groups say, is no substitute for a message and a smart strategy.

Even in a post-Abramoff Washington, lobbyists still wield great power and influence. They have information that lawmakers need — legislative and political. They have connections to members and their staffs. And they are an important source of campaign money for both parties. Indeed, interest groups and the consultants working for them say grass-roots lobbying works best in tandem with traditional lobbyists.

True Believers

Yet Southwest and others who have tried the new strategies are almost evangelical in their faith in the power of Internet grass-roots advocacy to send a strong message.

The technique, which was effectively used in the 2004 presidential primaries when Howard Dean's campaign and the liberal group MoveOn.org used it to sign up volunteers and raise money, has taken hold among business and industry groups in particular. Organizations such as the Chamber believe that mobilizing vote by vote, constituent by constituent, is critical to winning elections and the legislative debates that follow. That realization hit them after Republicans nearly lost the 2000 presidential election. Business groups started to see their member companies — including their employees, shareholders and even customers, as in the case of Southwest — as potential credible voices to carry their message to Congress.

The Chamber spent more than \$1 million in advance of the 2002 congressional elections to design and launch a Web-based initiative called "Vote for Business" to educate and mobilize

its member companies, associations, employees and others who may be sympathetic to its positions. Then the Chamber quickly retooled its system to organize the same constituencies for lobbying, beginning with President Bush's 2003 tax cut package. It has since been replicating the system for state chambers of commerce and members.

The system makes it convenient and simple for people plugged into the network to contact their senators or representatives. It can sort people by region, by issue of interest and by company, association or industry to be sure the Chamber is getting the right voices to speak to Congress on an issue.

The group can use the network to organize phone banks to lobby targeted lawmakers in advance of tough votes. To help defeat amendments to a tax cut package last fall that would have increased taxes on the oil industry, the Chamber fired up its database overnight and directed more than 1,000 phone calls to targeted senators from employers back home.

"We keep getting better and better at this," said Bill Miller, the Chamber's national political director.

Another business group, the Business-Industry Political Action Committee, better known as BIPAC, has developed a Web-based system around what it calls the "Prosperity Project," which enlists the help of workers on lobbying campaigns for business with the argument that their financial well-being is tied to the success of their employer or industry.

BIPAC built the system to mobilize business interests for elections, and it has replicated and tailored those tools for state chambers of commerce, trade associations and individual companies. The organization has spent \$500,000 just to protect the data from break-ins, and it raised \$6 million in 2004 to develop state-focused grass-roots programs.

More than 900 companies and business associations are now part of the Prosperity Project. One, the Pittsburgh-based glass and paint company PPG Industries, used the electronic tools to mobilize its employees and retirees to lobby for the 2003 Medicare overhaul — making the case to them that the law would ease a financial burden on the company and so help protect their individual benefits. The company says that more than 6,000 letters supporting the bill were faxed to Congress through its Web site. About 1,000 letters were faxed from PPG facilities around the country.

PPG, a heavy user of natural gas, plans to use the same technique to support efforts to expand domestic energy production.

Also using the Prosperity Project tools, the Financial Services Roundtable mobilized its member companies and their employees early last year to lobby the Senate for limits on class action lawsuits. The Chamber also joined in that effort. The legislation passed.

Caught in the Spam Filter

But standing out amid the huge quantities of e-mail that have begun flooding Congress, not to mention faxes, telephone calls and letters, is only going to get more difficult. Cut-and-paste e-mails are more likely to get lost in the noise — and congressional aides get those in large quantities.

Congressional offices that receive e-mail through Web-based services, where correspondents must use a lawmaker's own mail form, have installed filters to block messages that don't come from their states or districts. If a group organizing an e-mail campaign is using software that doesn't interact properly with those filters, messages can get dumped and no one ever sees them.

"The sad thing is, people sometimes think they are taking an action, and they're not being heard," said Brad Fitch, co-author of the Congressional Management Foundation's study of citizen advocacy. He has since become CEO of a new company, Knowlegis, that is developing software to help groups better coordinate their traditional lobbying with grass-roots advocacy.

Half of the congressional aides surveyed by the foundation said they believe that identical messages sent as part of grass-roots advocacy campaigns don't have real people behind them. Another 25 percent doubted the legitimacy of such e-mails. Shapiro, the Management Foundation's director, says that virtually every congressional office has a story of a lobbying campaign backed by e-mails or phone calls supposedly from constituents who later say they don't remember contacting Congress at all.

Lawmakers, too, are suspicious. During a discussion of lobbying rules and disclosure in the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee early this month, Democrat Mark Pryor of Arkansas said groups looking to stir up grass-roots support for their causes at times will misinform and mislead the public. "This is big business," Pryor said. "It's just political reality today, and it's getting more sophisticated all the time."

If the Web makes it easy for people to have their say, it's also easy to manipulate the conversation unseen. As Carol Darr, director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet at George Washington University, points out, the virtual, faceless nature of the Internet makes it more difficult to figure out whose interests really are speaking or who is orchestrating a message.

That's true of the most public form of correspondence, called Web logs, or blogs — free-form diaries and commentaries crowding the Web. Both politicians and interest groups have begun cultivating and reaching out to bloggers, since some have extensive followings. There have been unconfirmed reports that public relations executives have paid bloggers for positive posts and that companies try to surreptitiously spin blogs with corporate PR disguised as messages from individual readers.

"You've just got a Wild West out there," Darr said. "A global Wild West."

As part of the debate over lobbying rules in Congress, some members have proposed requiring interest groups, and the consultants working with them, to disclose how much they spend on grass-roots lobbying. But this question quickly gets complicated, especially because influential religious and conservative groups have such extensive grass-roots operations. "If you believe there ought to be disclosure of lobbying expenditures," said Wertheimer, "then you can't leave out what could be the largest part of the lobbying expenditures."

Getting Personal

Those who use grass-roots lobbying say they are facilitating democracy: finding people who

have a stake in the process and giving them an opportunity to participate. "It's an important way to further involve people who ought to be involved," said Miller at the U.S. Chamber.

Businesses say they never tell their employees how to vote or what to think, and they don't require them to take action. PPG, for example, tracks how many e-mails and faxes go out about a particular issue, but according to the company's director of governmental affairs, Judy Maskrey, the system doesn't tie them back to individual employees.

BIPAC has commissioned studies it says show that employees welcome information about issues that affect their company or industry. And while congressional offices report being overwhelmed by the resulting e-mails, there are also times when they court big shows of support.

When the legislation to send more class action suits to federal courts came to a vote in the Senate a year ago, an aide to the bill's sponsor, Republican Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, contacted the Chamber, the Financial Services Roundtable and others for help. Grassley wanted to demonstrate that there was broad support for the bill, and he also wanted real-life stories from back home to help make the argument for change.

The groups responded, and it was the first time the aide, Rita Lari Jochum, could recall getting so many responses by e-mail. She said that made it easy to review the messages by Blackberry while she went about her business in the Senate. The bill passed, and Jochum said the e-mails helped. "I think it reinforced the grass-roots support that was there," she said.

Aides to members of Congress trying to overturn the VA rule allowing optometrists to perform laser eye surgery say that the veterans mobilized by ophthalmologists played an important role. Convinced that their vision might be at risk, many contacted their lawmakers through a Web site set up by physicians called VetsCoalition.org.

"That's a group that's retired, they're active, and they're finally Internet savvy," said Wendy Taylor, an aide to Republican Rep. John Sullivan of Oklahoma, who led the fight in the House to overturn the rule.

If there's a compelling personal story included in the mail, it also helps lawmakers who are trying to make public policy debates real and immediate. What's more, every lawmaker's career depends upon staying tuned to constituents. As lobbyists work the halls of Congress, approaching members again and again on a particular issue, sooner or later they hear the question, "If it's so important, why don't I hear from people back home about it?"

Indeed, the ability of interest groups to identify people who are motivated enough on a single issue to send an e-mail — or even phone or visit their lawmakers — is one of the big benefits of grass-roots advocacy, said B.R. McConnon, CEO of Democracy Data & Communications, the company that designed the Chamber of Commerce's technology. "The end game is not the millions of e-mails going to the Hill," he said. "The end game is to find people who are genuinely interested and have a personal stake in the issue and are willing to communicate it."

A Social Revolution

And once those people are identified, they can be more active in the process. Observers of the industry say the new grass-roots technique can open up new conversations between people and their elected representatives and even redistribute power by bringing more people into the system who in the past may not have felt they could participate. It can open new lines of communication, bring fresh ideas, and even give workers in an industry or members of trade associations more say over the industry's agenda.

In the Congressional Management Foundation study, 79 percent of congressional aides surveyed said they believe the Internet has made it easier for people to get involved in public policy, and 55 percent said it has increased public understanding of what goes on in Washington. A plurality of 48 percent said they believe it has made members of Congress more responsive to their constituents.

It can also connect people with common interests who in the past might never have found one another. "Grassroots and the Internet are a revolutionary development in democratic government," said Pinkham of the Public Affairs Council. "It's complicated, it can be messy, it makes it harder to make a decision sometimes. But it also improves the process."

As long as everyone is being honest with one another and is not trying to manipulate constituencies, Pinkham said, it is an exercise in the oldest of political arts: coalition building. "That's finding someone who is like-minded and getting them to join your campaign," he said. "And that's OK."

And for lawmakers, like it or not, their very survival depends on finding a way to sort through the many voices — and respond. More and more, people communicate through the Internet — sometimes even if their desks are six feet apart. Indeed, for many people these days, e-mail is as personal as a written letter or a phone call.

If Congress doesn't learn how to sort through and respond to the growing Internet traffic, and heartfelt messages from constituents go unanswered, it may make lawmakers seem more remote rather than more approachable.

When people speak, whatever channels they use and whoever organizes them, Congress can't afford to simply tune them out, say those who have worked with Internet lobbying.

"If you're turning off your fax or filtering your e-mail," said BIPAC president Greg Casey, "you're doing it at your peril. Because people back home are going to remember that."

FOR FURTHER READING:

Blogs and campaign finance [\\(\text{HR 1606}\\)](#), p. 715 ; lobbying legislation [\\(\text{S 2349}\\)](#), p. 703; details of lobbying bills, CQ Weekly, p. 606; Abramoff plea bargain, p. 138; class action law [\\(\text{PL 109-2}\\)](#), p. 46; Medicare drug law [\\(\text{PL 108-173}\\)](#), 2003 Almanac, p. 11-3.

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