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# BUSINESS & LOBBYING

K Street Insider: The 'L' word  
By Dave Wenhold, CAE

On Capitol Hill, there is talk of lawmakers evoking ever-more-stringent ethical standards when it comes to lobbying, and some recent suggestions border on the extreme.

Proposed "reforms" are so absurd that lawmakers may as well suggest that anyone registered under the Federal Lobbying Disclosure Act wear a scarlet "L" on his or her chest so members easily can spot lobbyists and cross the street to avoid interaction with them. Or better yet, maybe the proposed rules should require we wear bad rain jackets and garish fedoras to identify us with Abramoff. While these, of course, are absurd examples, they fit within the Congress's current mindset as it rakes a profession over the coals. As one of my colleagues observed, it seems like a race to the bottom of sensibility.

Legislators are so focused on passing lobbying reform and demonizing an entire industry — all due to one person and his intolerable and illegal practices — that they are missing a critical point. The old system, rules and laws that since have been called broken and ineffectual, worked: Abramoff was caught, arrested and appropriately processed through the judicial system.

What is truly unfortunate is that Congress and the media are attempting to paint the whole lobbying profession with the same broad brush by which a corrupt individual could be drawn. If the same tactic were used on members, would each one be equated to Duke Cunningham or James Traficant? It's a grossly simplistic analogy — that's the danger of attacking an entire profession because of a couple bad apples.

What is even more interesting is that the vast majority of people in the lobbying community formerly worked on the Hill. In fact, people leave the Hill every day to go to K Street, associations or private business to help them navigate the waters of Capitol Hill. Why do Hill staffers do this, aside from the money? Because they have the expertise in tax matters, healthcare, the appropriation process or transportation issues and they understand how things work in Washington. If lobbying were as evil a profession as it is being portrayed these days, I doubt the good people leaving the Hill would sell their souls for a quick buck.

I would venture that most staffers, members and lobbyists get up every morning to tackle the issues and challenges faced by their constituencies in an honest and upstanding manner, acting with complete professionalism, within the boundaries of the law, utilizing good common practice and employing a sound ethical compass to keep their actions in check.

Readers of this column are interested in or participate in the political process, and I would wager that most people who enter the political profession hold on to the belief that they can make a difference. We all come to Washington to make our states, cities and country better places for our fellow Americans. That is why I came to Washington, and it's what makes me excited to be part of this profession.

That is why it is so discouraging to hear some people say that the political process would be better served if the lobbying profession were eliminated. That's one opinion — one with which I adamantly disagree. I believe that lobbyists are specialists in government affairs. We are experts in the political process.

To illustrate the value of hiring an expert, let me share two analogies. Why do people hire a

stockbroker to advise them on their finances? After all, any individual could do the research, spend all day tracking the market and possibly even make some sound investments. A person may do well to perform the function on his own; however, spending the time necessary to become proficient likely would be counterproductive. So you hire someone who knows the business — a stockbroker. How about going for a surgical procedure? There is enough information available online that one may be able to figure out the basics, but would you trust your own hand to get it right?

The same is true for hiring an expert in legislative and regulatory affairs. Lobbyists are here to help people and businesses better understand how Washington works, how the legislative process works, and how to navigate the political process. What the average American probably does not realize is that he or she is already represented by a lobbyist. Whether he enjoys low prices at the gas pump, relies on closed-captioning on TV, counts on his mortgage deduction or wants his kids participating in a civic group, these are all areas represented by lobbyists trying to make the average American life a little easier.

So as we go forward with this 110th Congress, let's move on to bigger issues that face the country and get away from painting everyone with the same scarlet brush. It is time to hang up the fedora and move on to serious legislative issues facing this great nation. Let's get back to the reason we all came to Washington in the first place — to make a difference.

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