Targeting Likely Advocates With Web Ads

By Jeffrey H. Birnbaum
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In contemporary Washington, a C.P.A. is more than a person who does your taxes. It's the newest front in congressional persuasion.

To trade groups hunting for legislative supporters, C.P.A. means Cost Per Advocate, and it refers to the amount they have to spend to sign up a single citizen-activist for their causes. The average C.P.A., by the way, is roughly $5.

That's right, to win over the voluntary services of a voter back home to push an agenda, a company or interest group needs to lay out a mere five spot. These lobbyists-for-a-day can be called upon to send e-mails, make phone calls or even visit their members of Congress to make the lobby's case.

Such approaches, despite their artificial origins, are generally considered the most effective type of influence. When constituents express a preference, lawmakers (who want more than anything to get reelected) tend to listen.

This has made networks of outside-the-Beltway advocates a longtime staple of lobbying. They have been pieced together using various methods -- association membership lists, blind-call telemarketing and direct-mail soliciting.

Lately, Internet advertising has been on the rise as a way to locate supporters, helping to lower the C.P.A. By minutely monitoring the effectiveness of Web-based commercials that invite people to sign up, interest groups are now able to alter their ads almost by the hour and conserve money.

Thanks to such quick-footedness, the $5-per-new-advocate average is commonplace at the OnPoint Advocacy arm of Alexandria-based Democracy Data & Communications LLC, a leading vendor of Internet technology for lobbying firms.

I've written before about the use of online ads to attract grass-roots activists. But when DDC and OnPoint offered to explain in detail how they refine their commercials, I decided to revisit the subject.

Some people (maybe many) will be appalled. They will see these efforts as manipulative, the kind of powerful tool that only wealthy interests can afford. Nonetheless, this is the future -- and the present -- of lobbying. It needs to be discussed.

The first thing you need to know is that the Internet can be watched very closely. OnPoint/DDC's offices in Old Town are filled with cubicles of computer experts who are in near-constant contact with thousands of display advertisements on Web sites. These experts can see when commercials are clicked on -- and when
they're not.

That means they can identify which Web sites lure the types of public-policy folks that lobby groups crave and which ones don't. They can also see which ads make the largest number of "sales" -- compel people to sign up as advocates -- and which ones fail to produce.

It turns out that ugly is better than pretty when it comes to lobbying commercials. Elaborate and beautifully colored ads tend to fall flat, said B.R. McConnon III, chief executive of DDC. Straightforward, text-heavy displays work much better.

In addition, the types of sites you might think would draw a lobbying crowd often don't. For instance, when the American Medical Association, the doctors' lobby, went looking for patients who would push for its policies, health Web sites didn't bring the best results. Game and puzzle sites were far superior.

The AMA hired DDC in 2003 to recruit activists for its then-nascent Patients' Action Network. On May 19, DDC placed 50 different ads on 7,500 Web sites soliciting people who agreed that Washington should crack down on lawsuits filed against physicians. Six weeks later, it had whittled that down to four ads on 123 sites.

Based on its observations, DDC decided to drop commercials that were sarcastic or vague: one that featured a photo of George Washington with a Band-Aid on his forehead, another that pictured a pregnant woman and asked, "Having trouble finding an ob-gyn?"

It settled instead on ads that had a plain white or blue background, pictured a red-tie-wearing President Bush and urged, "Save the U.S. healthcare system! Frivolous lawsuits are raising costs for YOU!" People clicked their "Tell Congress" buttons with alacrity.

DDC then concentrated these ads on news and reference sites (such as dictionaries and thesauruses) that had proved to attract primarily men and on entertainment sites that worked with women.

By the end of the six-week program, people were clicking on commercials twice as often on average than they had at the start. Those who did click though, in addition, were five times more likely to sign up as advocates than those who had clicked initially. The C.P.A. was ultimately cut to under $2.

Today, the Patients' Action Network has grown to more than 1 million members and the AMA is using its activists to press lawmakers to rescind cuts in Medicare reimbursements. OnPoint/DDC helps the AMA keep the network's membership large and eager by e-mailing updates to the advocates at least twice a month.

"Our Patients' Action Network allows us to reach more than 1.2 million people at the touch of a button," said Cecil B. Wilson, AMA's chairman. "More than 320,000 patients have already urged Congress to stop the Medicare physician payment cuts this year." Carefully honed online advertising made it all possible.

**WPP Picks Up Public Strategies**

London-based WPP Group PLC, already the owner of many of Washington's best-known lobbying and public relations companies, has purchased Public Strategies Inc., an Austin-based public affairs firm. Public Strategies, which has done lobbying and PR for major corporations since 1988, has nearly 175 employees in
15 U.S. cities as well as offices in London and Mexico City.

Like other WPP acquisitions, Public Strategies will operate independently under its current management. Its top officers are chairman Jack Martin, a former aide to former Texas senator Lloyd Bentsen; vice chairman Mark McKinnon, who was a media consultant on President Bush's two presidential campaigns; and Jeff Eller, president, who worked on media affairs in President Bill Clinton's White House.

WPP executive vice president Howard Paster, who worked with Eller in the Clinton White House, said he had been trying to buy Public Strategies for years. WPP, which has made a habit of grabbing up valuable government relations firms, already owns Timmons & Co. and the lobbying shops founded by former President Jimmy Carter aide Anne Wexler and former chairman of the Republican National Committee Edward W. Gillespie, among many others.

Rumor has it that WPP is about to buy another K Street company soon. Paster declined to comment.

Jeffrey Birnbaum writes about the intersection of government and business every other Monday. His e-mail address is kstreetconfidential@washpost.com. He will be online to discuss high-tech advocacy and K Street's recent hiring of more Democrats at 1 p.m. today at http://www.washingtonpost.com.

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