Learning From Microsoft's Error, Google Builds a Lobbying Engine

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When it comes to lobbying, Google does not intend to repeat the mistake that its rival Microsoft made a decade ago.

Microsoft was so disdainful of the federal government back then that it had almost no presence in Washington. Largely because of that neglect, the company was blindsided by a government antitrust lawsuit that cost it dearly.

Mindful of that history, Google is rapidly building a substantial presence in Washington and using that firepower against Microsoft, among others.

Google is reaching beyond Washington, as well. To publicize its policy positions and develop grass-roots support, the company introduced the Google Public Policy Blog this week.

"We're seeking to do public policy advocacy in a Googley way," said Andrew McLaughlin, Google's director of public policy and government affairs. "We want our users to be part of the effort."

In its first major policy assault on a competitor, Google's Washington office helped write an antitrust complaint to the Justice Department and other government authorities asserting that Microsoft's new Vista operating system discriminates against Google software. Last night, under a compromise with federal and state regulators, Microsoft agreed to make changes to Vista's operations.

Google credits Microsoft's missteps in the 1990s with helping it see the wisdom of setting up shop in Washington in a big way and using the many tools available in the capital, such as lobbying and lawyering, to get its way on major policy matters.

"The entire tech industry has learned from Microsoft," said Alan B. Davidson, head of Google's Washington office. "Washington and its policy debates are important. We can't ignore them."

Two years ago, Google was on the verge of making that Microsoft-like error. Davidson, then a 37-year-old former deputy director of the Center for Democracy & Technology, was the search-engine company's sole staff lobbyist in Washington. As recently as last year, Google co-founder Sergey Brin had trouble getting meetings with members of Congress.

To change that, Google went on a hiring spree and now has 12 lobbyists and lobbying-related professionals on staff here -- more than double the size of the standard corporate lobbying office -- and is continuing to add people.
Its in-house talent includes such veteran government insiders as communications director Robert Boorstin, a speechwriter and foreign policy adviser in the Clinton White House, and Jamie Brown, a White House lobbyist under President Bush.

Google has also hired some heavyweight outside help to lobby, including the Podesta Group, led by Democrat Anthony T. Podesta, and the law firm King & Spalding, led by former Republican senators Daniel R. Coats (Ind.) and Connie Mack (Fla.). To help steer through regulatory approvals in its proposed acquisition of DoubleClick, an online advertising company, Google recently retained the law firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck.

"We've had to grow quickly because our company has grown so fast and the issues that impact the Internet have come into greater focus in recent years," Davidson said.

Google's path is not unlike the one eventually taken by Microsoft, which was essentially represented in Washington for a long time by a single lobbyist. For a couple of embarrassing years in the mid-1990s, Microsoft's primary lobbying presence was "Jack and his Jeep" -- Jack Krumholz, the software giant's lone in-house lobbyist, who drove a Jeep Grand Cherokee to lobbying visits.

But after the Justice Department filed its antitrust lawsuit in 1998, Microsoft under Krumholz began what was then considered the largest government-affairs makeover in corporate history. The company now has one of the most dominating, multifaceted, and sophisticated influence machines around -- one that spends tens of millions a year. Microsoft has 23 people working out of its government affairs office in Washington; 16 are lobbyists.

Google is not that big. But it is set to move from temporary space on Pennsylvania Avenue NW to new and larger digs on New York Avenue NW. The suite will include a large meeting area where the company plans to hold seminars about the Internet and high-tech issues.

To make friends on Capitol Hill, Google plans to initiate Google 101, a series of tutorials for congressional aides that will teach them how to use Google's search engine better and faster. The aides will learn, for example, how to do simple math by writing numbers in the proper order on Google's search line.

Google has gotten serious about Washington's money game. The company established a political action committee last year and raised $57,220. For the next election, the PAC already has nearly half that amount on hand and company executives expect its political donations to soar.

Google is also attracting attention in the presidential campaign. It is co-sponsoring two candidate debates (one Democratic and one Republican) and has already hosted four presidential contenders at its California headquarters: Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), Gov. Bill Richardson (D-N.M.), former senator John Edwards (D-N.C.) and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.).

Google executives are parading through Washington with some frequency and being well-received, thanks to the advance work of their capital-based staff. In just the past few weeks, Google executives testified to Congress on such issues as immigration (Google wants more highly educated immigrants to work in the United States) and the future of video (Google owns YouTube, the popular video Web site).

The company has peppered the Federal Communications Commission with recommendations on how to handle a major upcoming auction of telecommunications spectrum. Google Washington's Richard S. Whitt,
a former head of regulatory affairs at MCI, helped write those suggestions, which the company hopes will enhance people's ability to access the Internet -- and Google.

As for the company's future in Washington, "I expect we will grow in all dimensions," Davidson said. "We're not finished yet."

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