

The Old Advocacy

The process "aimed at influencing public officials and especially members of a legislative body on legislation" has been variously described as lobbying, government relations, public affairs and advocacy along with several more uncomplimentary epithets by commentators, critics, practitioners, politicians and clients over the years. More recently the term "spin doctor" has been used in a derogatory context to describe the activities of public relations consultants and political staff members as well as those referred to above. For the moment, let's call it lobbying.

For many years lobbyists operated on the basis of the old boy network. Often the product of the system, ex political staffers, ex-politicians, journalists and retired public servants, armed with the contacts made whilst inside the system, would sell access and influence to clients with interests matching the lobbyist's area of expertise. Inevitably the currency of the network of contacts diminished over time and more quickly as the capital of goodwill was expended and as the original inside contacts themselves moved on to other positions. Incredibly, pockets of these dinosaurs still exist.

Then arose the larger broadly-based government relations firms comprising a combination of the old guard, but supplemented with graduates in communications and political science. The largest of these firms were also able to overlay a management system and add sophistication to the services they offered. Before long these large government relations firms began to coalesce into branches of multi-national communications conglomerates offering massive resources to run large national and international programs.

In parallel with these developments, the rationalisation of the "big eight" accounting firms into fewer, larger groups and their expansion into management consulting, brought them close to, and in many cases inside, the sphere of government relations with direct competition ensuing. Similar trends in the amalgamation and globalisation of legal firms brought them into the government relations market place. Some of the international mergers in the communications field were made without much forethought and have since contracted into smaller operations centred in the larger cities of Sydney and Melbourne.

History has shown that when large objects collide, fragmentation occurs with smaller objects spun off in the process. With corporate mergers, some clients began to feel that after meeting the Principal at the start of a project, they were then redirected to junior consultants. This resulted in client resentment. Similarly, professionals in the merged entities, no longer had the prospect of buying into the business and there began a drift of these people out of the large firms into a new regime of smaller, more specialised consultancies, whether legal, accounting, management consulting or public affairs.

For many clients the post-amalgamation fragmentation was a welcome development as they were now able to select specific expertise knowing that they would be dealing with the expert and not a junior employee.

And so today there is a mixture of the old ways, some remaining semblance of the larger government relations operations and a plethora of small, specialised consultancies.

It is not yet a science, but it is no longer an art form.

The challenge today is for all those offering public affairs services to ramp-up their efforts by adopting web-based technologies, client collaboration and new ways of thinking about the development and implementation of advocacy strategies.

I call this The New Advocacy.