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# A Description of Lobbying as Advocacy Public Relations

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## A Description of Lobbying as Advocacy Public Relations

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This study defines lobbying as advocacy public relations. Data were collected from self-administered surveys of 222 registered lobbyists in Oregon. This study provides insight into a specialized group of public relations practitioners.

Lobbying, as an accepted and legal process, allows the voices of citizen groups, associations, labor unions, corporations and others to be heard in the political arena. Lobbyists break down complicated issues and present the most pertinent information to legislators, staff members, or committees in short documents or in quick one-on-one exchanges. These activities add to the extensive research and evidence that usually accompanies proposed legislation. Increasingly, lawmakers rely on lobbyists for information. Yet, the concept of lobbying as an information-providing communication process is rarely discussed in the public relations body of knowledge. cursory descriptions constitute the extent of public relations research on lobbying.

### *Lobbying: A Constitutionally Protected Communication Process*

Lobbying has been part of the American political and legislative system from the beginning (Zorack, 1990). By definition, lobbying usually involves attempting to influence legislation. Zorack explains:

Lobbying has been defined in many ways but, in essence, it is the right of any citizen or interest group to petition government or Congress and provide information designed to influence the passage or defeat of any legislation of the United States. (p. 24)

The Woodstock Theological Center, a non-profit research institute at Georgetown University, defines lobbying as “the deliberate attempt to influence political decisions through various forms of advocacy directed at policymakers on behalf of another person, organization, or group” (Arroyo, Connor, Gardner, Lacovar, & McCarthy, 2002, p. 82).

In 1960, Lester Milbrath, the so-called “father of lobbying research,” first analyzed lobbying from a communication perspective (Koepl, 2000). Milbrath (1960) claims, “Communication is the only means of influencing or changing a perception; the lobbying process, therefore, is totally a communication process” (p. 32). Forty-five years later, Dondero and Lurch (2005) write, “Lobbying is a two-way communication process” (p. 87). They describe lobbyists as “great” communicators to legislators because they serve as liaisons between constituents and legislators.

Although it has always been a communication process, Koepl (2000) and Terry (2001), suggest that the practice of lobbying has evolved since its inception. Koepl (2000) defines lobbying as “the attempted or successful influence of legislative-administrative decisions by public authorities through interested representatives. The influence is intended, implies the use of communication and is targeted on legislative and executive bodies” (p. 71). According to Dondero & Lurch (2005), lobbyists perform three primary functions in the legislative arena: 1) disseminate information needed for crafting legislation to legislators and their staff, 2) aggregate public opinion around major issues affecting their clients, and 3) help set the political agenda by creating coalitions to support or oppose specific bills (p. 86). In effect, lobbyists are the eyes and ears of the public, information providers, representatives of their clients and constituents, shapers

of the government agenda, movers of legislation, coalition builders, and campaign contributors (p. 87).

*Lobbying, Public Relations and Advocacy*

Lobbying is often considered a specialization of public relations. Undergraduate public relations textbooks, for example, tend to define lobbying as a function of public affairs: Heath and Cousino (1990) describe it as a function of issues management; Toth (1986) recognizes it as a specialized area of public relations; Guth and Marsh (2000) suggest that lobbyists pass on persuasive information to government officials; and Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) define it as a function of public affairs that builds and maintains relations with government primarily for the purpose of influencing legislation and regulation. cursory descriptions constitute the extent of the public relations curriculum on lobbying.

Such cursory examination is unfortunate because as players in the political arena lobbyists represent, educate, and advocate on behalf of their clients' interests. Mayhew (1997) succinctly describes lobbying as "a process of influence that travels along routes sustained by exchanges of information" in which "both parties have an opportunity to make their message influential as well as informative" (p. 218). Therefore, lobbyists develop various methods, strategies, and tactics to gain access, inform, influence, and pressure policymakers who make policy decisions that affect the well being of their clients, the American public, the local, national, and international communities, and present and future generations of citizens. Lobbying efforts have become highly sophisticated and multidimensional, relying on a complex array of persuasive devices.

Multiple case studies (see, for example, Birnbaum, 1992; Goldstein, 1999; Mackenzie, 2002; Milbrath, 1963; Rosenthal, 2001; Zeigler & Baer, 1969) explaining methods, practices and models have been written to demonstrate the functional nature of lobbying. Browne (1998) finds this sort of research necessary because as he explains:

"Their techniques are many. This certainly seems a big change, at least at first glance, from the early days of American government when lobbyists were named for their simple penchant for hanging out in congressional lobbies – the halls – waiting to corral a passing legislator. Modern lobbying involves far more. In reality, it always did – more than most people realize. Its techniques include not only the contacts made to advocate issues, and the research needed to make any deal, there's also a great amount of what might best be called lobbying foreplay." (p. 62)

Furthermore, he stresses that lobbyists need to be ready at all times to cover every base because the interactions are "much more than just a pleasant interlude between a lobbyist and a public official" (Browne, 1998, p. 63). Current theories and social science models agree that information is at the heart of the lobbying process (Mayhew, 1997, p. 219). Dondero and Lunch (2005) note, "lobbyists today rely on more businesslike relationships built on delivering credible information" (p. 89).

The above definitions reveal that lobbying is a communicative process that attempts to persuade public policy makers on behalf of interest groups. The American League of Lobbyists, the national professional association dedicated exclusively to lobbying, defines lobbying as "advocacy of a point of view, either by groups or individuals," (ALL, n.d.) and the Capitol Club, a professional association of state lobbyists in Oregon, describes itself as "an organization of professional advocates" (Capitol Club, n.d.). This research defines lobbying as "the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted

audiences to look favorably on – or accept the point of view of – the individual, the organization, or the idea” (Edgett, 2002, p. 1).

The words advocacy and advocate are frequently found in discussions, definitions, and descriptions of public relations and lobbying. For instance, the American League of Lobbyists and the Capitol Club use the terms advocacy and lobbying interchangeably. Additionally, advocacy is one of the professional values included in the Public Relations Society of America’s “Member Code of Ethics.” Upon joining PRSA, the world’s largest organization for public relations practitioners, members pledge to serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those they represent by providing a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate (PRSA, n.d.).

To differentiate between lobbying and advocacy, Ezell (2001) considers lobbying one of many advocacy tactics that seek to shape social institutions and direct public policy. Advocacy consists of purposive efforts to change specifically existing and/or purposed policies or practices on behalf of or with a specific client or group of clients (Ezell, 2001). This research defines advocacy as such. In their book on argumentation, Rybacki and Rybacki (1991) also note the primacy of enacting change. They define advocates as individuals who argue in favor of a change in belief or behavior. In her framework for ethically desirable public relations advocacy, Edgett (2002) defines advocacy as “the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted audiences to look favorably on – or accept the point of view of – the individual, the organization, or the idea” (p. 1). Thus, advocacy is a central function of both public relations and lobbying.

The conception of lobbying and the public relations roles lobbyists enact can be extracted from this research, but the relationship is not explicitly discussed. The current study seeks to formalize this relationship by addressing the following research question:

RQ: Do lobbyists define their work as advocacy?

## METHOD

This research employed quantitative research methodology because it seeks to describe the behavior of an unstudied population.

All registered lobbyists in Oregon were invited to participate in a self-administered survey of perceptions of the lobbying profession. A census was conducted for the current study because it was practical and valuable to this particular research. Because the types of state lobbyists vary tremendously, from contract lobbyists to full-time public agency employees, it was necessary to reach as many members of the population as possible. A total of 719 surveys were mailed to registered Oregon lobbyists, and 222 responses were received, resulting in a 32.5% response rate.

Of the total respondents, 66.2% were men and 33.7% were women. Nearly all of the respondents identified themselves as White/Anglo, with only four percent of the respondents identifying themselves as either Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, or Asian/Pacific Islander. The majority of the respondents (60.1%) were between the ages of 40 and 60, and 76% of the respondents were over the age of 40. The respondents to the current study are well educated, with more than 90% of the respondents earning a bachelor’s degree or higher. More than half (51.8%) reported earning an advanced degree: 25.2% reported earning a master’s degree and 26.6% reported earning either a Ph.D., M.D., or J.D.

Ginny Lang, president of the lobbyist organization the Capitol Club, agrees that this profile fits her perceptions of the make up of Oregon lobbyists. However, she recognizes that

more women and younger people are entering the field. “In 1990, I was still among only a handful of women who were lobbying in Oregon,” said Lang (Lang, personal communication, May 23, 2006)

More than one third of the respondents to the current survey reported their current organizational setting as a non profit organization. Other respondents identified their current organization settings as: public sector (23%), lobbying firms (13.5%), corporations (10.8%), and university (4.5%). Only five percent of the respondents reported their current organizational setting as either a public affairs agency or a public relations agency. Additionally, respondents who checked ‘other’ for their current organizational setting reported a range of settings: unions, law firms, trade associations, state agency, consulting firm, community college, public corporation, and health care professional association. Thus, the organizational environments of lobbyists in Oregon represent a broad range of interests, purposes, and settings.

Twenty percent of the respondents reported being contract lobbyists, individuals who are hired to lobbying on behalf of a group, and 19% reported their current job title as public affairs. Only five percent reported public relations as their current job title. Fifty-six percent of the respondents to the current survey reported ‘other’ as their current job title. More than 35 different job titles were reported by respondents. The most common job title was director, including executive directors, program directors, policy directors and organizing directors. Twenty respondents specified their current job title as either governmental relations or governmental affairs. Other job titles reported include: attorneys, elected officials, university presidents, environmental advocate and radio/TV co-host and co-producer.

More than 60% of the respondents belong to the Capitol Club, the professional association of state lobbyists in Oregon. Nine respondents reported being members of PRSA while only one respondent reported being a member of the American League of Lobbyists, the national professional association dedicated exclusively to lobbying. Forty-three percent of the respondents reported being members of other professional organizations, with the Oregon State Bar being reported the most. Respondents to the current survey report belonging to professional organizations that are particular to their specific line of work. For example, respondents reported being members of the following professional organizations: Association of Counties, Oregon Dental Hygienists Association, and American Fisheries Society.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research questions asked if lobbyists define their work as advocacy where advocacy is defined as “the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted audiences to look favorably on – or accept the point of view of – the individual, the organization, or the idea” (Edgett, 2002, p. 1). Overall, respondents (N = 222) agreed that this definition describes their work (M = 4.18, with 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree). Thus, Edgett’s definition of advocacy serves as an appropriate definition of lobbying because more than 85% of respondents to the current study agreed with the statement as a description of their work.

Respondents whose full-time job is lobbying (N = 78) reported greater agreement with the definition (M = 4.29, SD = .65) than respondents who lobby part-time (N = 136, M = 4.12, SD = .84). However, the results of a *t* test for independent means did not reveal a significant statistical difference between these two groups, ( $t(212) = 1.60, p = .110$ ). These findings indicate that both full-time and part-time lobbyists agree that Edgett’s definition of advocacy defines their work.

Using Edgett's definition of advocacy to define lobbying strengthens current definitions and characterizations of lobbying found in the scholarly literature and promoted by professional organizations and institutions. Most importantly, defining lobbying as advocacy affirms its fit with the agency model of professional-client relationship, which creates a framework to discuss the ethics of lobbying.

Influence is a consistent theme in the descriptions and definitions of lobbying (Arroyo, Connor, Gardner, Lacovar, & McCarthy, 2002; Koepl, 2002; Mayhew, 1997; Zorack, 1990). For example, the Woodstock Theological Center defines lobbying as "the deliberate attempt to influence [italics added] political decisions through various forms of advocacy directed at policymakers on behalf of another person, organization, or group" (Arroyo, Connor, Gardner, Lacovar, & McCarthy, 2002, p. 82). Zorack (1990) explains lobbying as "the right of any citizen or interest group to petition government or Congress and provide information designed to influence [italics added] the passage or defeat of any legislation of the United States" (p. 24). Defining lobbying as "the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted audiences to look favorably on – or accept the point of view of – the individual, the organization, or the idea" (Edgett, 2002, p. 1) demonstrates the purpose and function of lobbying without specifically referring to influence.

Yet, the notion of persuasion may still create negative connotations of the practice because both scholars and practitioners argue that lobbying is much more than persuasion. For instance, Berry (1977) notes that lobbyists must serve as experts, providing both technical and legal information during the communication process, because knowledge is more important than persuasion. When given the opportunity to describe their work, some respondents to the current study compared themselves to teachers who educate legislators.

Respondents who disagreed with the statement (N = 10) were asked to describe their work in one sentence. Many of these descriptions included some type of educational component because the information lobbyists provide to legislators is crucial to the decision making process. For example, a full-time lobbyist who represents both corporate and non-profit organizations wrote, "Lobbying is very much like being a teacher; one must take very complex information and synthesize it into easily understood materials to provide legislators with facts upon which to make decisions." Another respondent who lobbies full-time for a labor union described his job as "primarily educating those who can make a decision." Other respondents felt that Edgett's definition of advocacy overemphasizes the persuasive nature of lobbying and fails to include its educational element. For example, a full-time lobbyist who works for a non-profit organization noted, "it is not just persuading but educating them on the issue at hand – or results of choices." A veteran lobbyist of 15 years who agreed with the offered definition added, "It's not all persuasion. Presenting the full range of facts and educating the public also creates a more favorable response." These statements indicate that education and persuasion often work in tandem during lobbying campaigns.

Although lobbying is rarely described specifically as an educational activity, this function can be explicated from definitions that characterize lobbyists as information purveyors (Dondero & Lunch, 2005; Zorack, 1990). Arroyo, Connor, Gardner, Lacovar, and McCarthy (2002) describe lobbying as "a valuable educational function, because honest, well-informed lobbyists provide policymakers and their staffs with relevant information and incisive arguments and analysis bearing on matters of public debate" (p. 86). Disseminating information to legislators and their staff is a primary function of lobbying. Lobbyists often break down complex policy issues for legislators who do not have the time to thoroughly examine all of the information;

therefore, lobbyists play a vital role in the formation of public policy. Nevertheless, their role as advocates could diminish the educational function of lobbying because lobbyists “make their messages influential as well as informative” (Mayhew, 1997, p. 218). This exchange of information is a crucial communication process in our democratic society, but since lobbyists have a particular end goal in mind, the passage or defeat of legislation that is in their clients’ interests, labeling them as educators may be a mischaracterization.

## **IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this study was to define lobbying as advocacy public relations. As the first research study investigating this area, this study systematically and scientifically examined attitudes and practices of a specialized group of public relations practitioners. Consequently, this study has generated numerous findings and provides directions for several areas of future research. On a theoretical level, this study supports the advocacy function of public relations by examining a specialized group of practitioners. This study also provides implications for practitioners because it validates the practice of lobbying as an information-providing communication activity.

A main limitation of this study is that it was conducted in a single state: Oregon. Because of its political culture, Oregon may be a special case. Thus, the results of the current study may not be generalizable to lobbyists in other states and federal lobbyists. Oregon lobbyists indicate a high sense of identification with their occupation, which Zeigler and Baer (1969) attribute to the existence of the Capitol Club.

Oregon may also be a unique case because “during the last two decades of the twentieth century, Oregon’s politics became increasingly volatile, with environmental and natural-resource issues, field burning, gay rights, taxes, doctor-assisted suicide, school funding, and vote by mail elections among the more controversial matters before the public” (Robbins, 2002, Section 7, ¶ 1). At this point it is unknown how Oregon’s political culture could have affected the results of the current study because every state has a few issues that are salient to it. To be able to further generalize the results of this study, the self-administered mail survey could be sent to a random sample of registered lobbyists in multiple states.

Oregon State Law requires citizens, university presidents, CEOs and any other persons who spend more than 24 hours per year lobbying to register with the Oregon Government Standards and Practices Commission as lobbyists. Thus, the number of respondents who reported lobbying as their full time job (N = 85) limits findings from the current study as lobbying may be one of many responsibilities for respondents. It was beyond the scope of this study to assess how the part time nature of lobbying affects role performance. Memberships of state lobbying organizations should serve as populations for future research studies. This method would eliminate potential respondents who do not lobby as a practice or as a business but are registered lobbyists because of their personal interest in one particular bill.

Even with these limitations, the current study has contributed to the public relations body of knowledge because it examined an overlooked specialized group of public relations practitioners.

Furthermore, this research is important because it demonstrates that the information-providing role that lobbyists perform in the public policy arena is underplayed in academic literature while the persuasive aspects of the profession are overemphasized. McGrath (2005) points out, “Lobbyists certainly do a great deal more than pure lobbying” (p. 128). An

exaggerated portrayal of lobbying that fails to embrace its theoretical, legal, and communication foundations is most often accepted in public vernacular.

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