

Focus on astroturfing spurs need to ensure authenticity

By Jaimy Lee

Communicators have increasingly turned to grassroots programs to engage and activate stakeholders over the past two years, as policymakers in Washington assess issues ranging from healthcare reform to climate change.

Yet as the volume of grassroots programs has increased, so have criticisms and allegations of so-called “astroturfing,” which means passing off formally planned PR or communications campaigns as spontaneous, grassroots, populist activity. Some public affairs professionals agree the definition of astroturfing has changed in recent years, shifting from a description of near-fraudulent activity to an allegation that is tossed around often by opponents of an issue.

Campaign challenges

For example, the term came up repeatedly in mainstream media coverage of last summer’s healthcare town halls, as well as when grassroots firm Bonner and Associates sent forged letters to policymakers on behalf of the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity in 2009.

Rikki Amos, associate director of political involvement for the Public Affairs Council (PAC), says, “There certainly is this perception right now that if anything is mass-organized, it must be astroturfing.”

As grassroots efforts, especially digital grassroots, become more integral to public affairs programs, communicators face numerous



Don't Let the EPA Destroy Appalachian Jobs

Once again, Washington has gone too far.

New regulations imposed by bureaucrats at the Environmental Protection Agency will devastate Appalachia's coal economy — destroying jobs, communities and a way of life.

Without public review or comment, the EPA has set water quality standards for surface and underground mines that are impossible to meet — sweeping restrictions that threaten the livelihoods of thousands of families in West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

The Federation for American Coal, Energy and Security (FACES of Coal) calls on our elected representatives to block this abuse of regulatory power — and protect Appalachian jobs.

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FACES of Coal seeks to educate the public on coal mining's value

challenges when creating and implementing authentic campaigns.

Doug Goodyear, CEO of DCI Group, says, “The more the Internet becomes central to people’s everyday lives, the more important it becomes as a tool for communicating.”

He notes that websites should be authentic and provide content and information the public and policymakers can use.

“People are smart,” Goodyear says. “If something doesn’t provide good content and information and give people what they’re looking for, it won’t have success.”

The Federation for American Coal, Energy and Security (FACES of Coal), which debuted in August 2009, is an alliance that aims to educate the pub-

lic and policymakers about the value of coal mining.

The group’s objective is to educate, unify, and vocalize mining communities in states such as West Virginia, says Bryan Brown, VP of Brown Communications, a local public affairs firm hired to handle the effort.

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When addressing media on an issue such as astroturfing, Brown says he provides names of local and regional supporters who add credibility to the campaign.

The tools and tactics the public affairs industry employs to create authentic grassroots programs is more of a focus now than two years ago.

“You could attribute that to the prevalence and scope of the major issues,” says PAC’s Amos, noting that the increase in grassroots activity is coming from all organizations, including nonprofits, trade groups, and corporations.

Greater scrutiny

Since President Obama entered office, the number of policy issues in Washington has not decreased. In turn, communicators can expect the public and policymakers to remain as savvy and interested in issues this year, especially given the November mid-term elections.

“Organizations are thinking about multiple strategies to convey their stories to legislators, recognizing that legislators are more keenly aware than ever of constituent concern,” says Amos.

As the public becomes more politically engaged with policy issues such as healthcare and jobs, communicators find themselves dealing with more questions and concerns regarding astroturfing.

“We’ve seen some big issues, both on the policy front and the healthcare debate, which make big grassroots initiatives more public,” says Amos. “Because

of that, everybody’s collective awareness has gone up.”

Groups that choose to disclose participation in coalitions and alliances can only bolster an argument, says Jeff Mascott, managing partner at Adfero Group.

“Full disclosure and transparency is not only a good thing to do from a corporate responsibility standpoint, but it is also effective,” he explains. “That’s much better than trying to hide behind the argument.” ●

AVOID ACCUSATIONS OF ASTROTURFING

Understand the public's digital and political savvy
Develop content that both educates the public and helps inform constituents about an issue

Be up-front about participation
Show you are responsible by telling the public why you support an issue, instead of hiding behind it

Educate activists
Teach grassroots activists how to write letters on issues and meet members of Congress as a way to be more impactful

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