



Tactics of a Local Tobacco Lobbyist, an E-mail Interview

By Pete Bialick, President, GASP of Colorado, April 2000

I recently exchanged e-mail correspondence with a man I'll call Mr. X. Who is Mr. X? Mr. X is a PR director for a large company with offices in many states. Mr. X knows a lot of people and one of those people — a close friend — is a tobacco lobbyist who works for RJ Reynolds.

Just before Bill Owens publicly announced he'd like to see the tobacco settlement dollars go to education and children's health initiatives, I sent an e-mail out to our action network titled 'Is Bill Owens our friend? The e-mail documented how much money Owens had taken from Big Tobacco while he was a legislator and how much money he received from tobacco lobbyists during his recent Gubernatorial campaign. It also mentioned that Owens is good friends with Pam Inmann — a highly aggressive and influential Philip Morris lobbyist in Colorado. Mr. X responded shortly thereafter, saying that Owens has other close friends at RJR. This is where our e-mail interview begins.

Mr. X discusses various tactics and techniques used by Big Tobacco. Many of these techniques have already been made public in Mother Jones, interviews with former tobacco lobbyist Victor Crawford, and the industry's internal documents. Mr. X, however, wants to remain anonymous and I have assured him that I would keep his name anonymous. Mr. X has agreed to let GASP use this information for this article.

The Interview

Pete:

"Thank you Mr. X, my guess would be that the RJR lobbyist you refer to is either Wallace or Michelle Stealey, Chuck Ford, or Lynn Young the principal lobbyists for RJR in Colorado. Out of curiosity, and you don't need to reveal names, how do you know that RJR lobbyists are close to Owens?"

Mr. X:

"It's none of the names on your list. It's a personal friend of Owens and mine (who knows about how I feel about his affiliation with tobacco)."

"Owen has been lobbied on this issue for years, but now he's in a position to really hurt the anti-tobacco movement. Most big tobacco companies do not allow their grass roots specialists to lobby in their home state. So, the person to whom I elude doesn't even live in Colorado."

"You understand, I assume, that tobacco cares deeply how the dollars are spent. They'd like to be associated with positive educational, social services, or anything else that draws attention to the 'public service' made possible by the tobacco settlement and away from anything that educates the public about the insanity of smoking."

"You are also aware that tobacco has the MOST sophisticated grassroots lobbying organization in America. The good news though, is that the machine has fallen upon hard times with the settlement. My suspicion is that the California settlement yesterday may force big tobacco to oil it up and get it going again."

"Keep up the good fight."

Pete:

"Governor Owens recently announced he wants all the tobacco settlement to go to education and children's health. Do you know if your RJR friend had anything to do with it?"

"I know RJR has a monthly newsletter that goes to a lot of Coloradans. Internal documents show that 12 years ago they asked all these people to write their legislator to oppose a statewide law on smoking in public places. But I would appreciate more details. Also, do you know if RJR is using the network to try to steer settlement dollars away from tobacco prevention?"

Mr. X:

"My guess is yes. He met with the Governor in the last few weeks. It is certainly in Tobacco's interest to associate the money to positive programming, rather than smoking cessation programs."

"I need to ask for anonymity on this issue. My dad died of lung-cancer, so I'm with you 150 percent. but on this issue involving the governor, I need to be in the background. OK?"

Pete:

"Mr. X, I want to assure you that I will not reveal your identity or name. What else can you tell me about the grassroots network?"

Mr. X:

"It's by far the most sophisticated direct mail, letter desk generation, database management, coalition-building organization in America, bar none!"

"While the rest of America takes it for granted that lawmakers will surely do the right thing, big tobacco engages all organizations who share in any way with their ideology. These include smokers, anti-tax groups, anti-government groups, militia groups, convenience store owners, related industry groups."

"What this creates, and I'm in this line of work so I know, in the minds of policy makers is that what should be a slam-dunk decision is a lot more controversial than it really is."

"Bottom line: tobacco is far more sophisticated and organized than any of its opposition."

"The 'machine' which was in the process of being dismantled after the settlement, in my opinion, will be re-oiled if lawsuits like the one in California two weeks ago begin to catch on."

"Big tobacco can't allow ordinances that prevent people from smoking wherever they want; they can't afford to have the public inundated with anti-smoking educational programs. So, they lobby to have the money spent on positive projects involving education, feeding the poor, etc., anything that isn't going to make it harder for them to hang on to smokers."

Pete:

"The tobacco companies have gotten much more effective with their grassroots campaigns. A 1987 document shows that RJR sent 24,426 smokers alerts asking them to write to legislators about a clean indoor air law being debated in the legislator. 749 wrote with 473 going to state reps. That is not a very good response rate and 70% of smokers want to quit (down from 90% at one time)."

"I suspect they ghost write letters and provide smokers incentives to write or show up at local public hearings (money or a carton of cigarettes). Do you know if this happens, and can you give me any specifics?"

"I am working on our newsletter. It will have a special report on some of the internal documents. Mother Jones did an expose on some of the stuff the companies do in 1996. Would you be willing to write an article anonymously about the grassroots issue? How about RJR connection to Owens? Or if you wish, I could call you and conduct an interview."

Mr. X:

"The way it works is that they call the smoker, tell them of the threat, and offer to write a letter on their behalf. The letter is then sent to the 'constituent' who signs and forwards."

"The response rate is actually guaranteed, because the letter is already addressed to the policy maker, an envelope prepared, and so on. Literally all the constituents must do is sign it, place it in an envelope and pop it in the mailbox. And let's face it, anyone who's still smoking with the mountain of evidence out there, for the most part, is pretty easily lead."

"It's quite the machine!"

Pete:

"You said last week that Bill Owens met with 'Mr. RJR' about two weeks ago. Do you know who initiated the meeting (Owens or Mr. RJR)? Do you know if they met here or at the Governor's monthly conference?"

Mr. X:

"I don't know any of the details, just that they were supposed to meet. My guess, and it's only a guess, is that my friend arranged the meeting. I can't imagine Owens WANTING a meeting to talk about tobacco issues."

Pete:

"Do you know where the governor and Mr. RJR met?"

Mr. X:

"They were supposed to meet here in Denver, but I don't know if the meeting ever took place. I would normally be willing to call my friend to ask about it, but then he'd know I was the source."

Pete:

"Do you know if RJR provides financial incentives or gifts to entice smokers to participate in grassroots efforts?"

Mr. X:

"I believe that they been given free catalog gifts for their efforts. When they meet in bars, the tobacco representative usually buys."

Pete:

"It has been reported that RJR has a 'Peaceful Coexistence program'; that works on opposing no-smoking ordinances especially when it deals with restaurants. Do you know if RJR uses the program to give dollars or in-kind payments to restaurant associations and restaurant owners to go out and oppose no-smoking ordinances?"

Mr. X:

"I don't know if how they fund these campaigns. But I do know that they've formed coalitions in nearly every state to oppose any restrictions like the ones you reference. RJR funds them along with restaurant owner associations, anti-government and tax groups, convenience store associations, etc."

"It's very sophisticated, very well-funded. Think of it as bringing together disparate groups who may not favor tobacco, but who have an ax to grind, and tobacco is the beneficiary."

Pete:

"Have you ever heard of RJR using the names of dead people when sending ghost-written letters to the editor?"

Mr. X:

"Not that I'm aware of. Usually, they reach a live body via telephone, then either transfer them online to their elected official, or write a letter that is then sent to the constituent for his/her signature and forwarding. But it's almost always tied to another issues like taxes, anti-government, etc. As you can imagine, the company's databases are huge."

Pete:

"Can you get more specific about the coalitions RJR has formed in every state to oppose smoking restrictions? Do you know any names of groups and who leads them? Has your friend told you any specific stories about what they have done in Colorado or other states either locally or statewide that you could share?"

Mr. X:

"If I get any more detailed this will come back to haunt me. I cannot afford that. There are coalitions in every state."

Pete:

"In 1996 Mother Jones did an expose on Big Tobacco's 'grassroots' efforts including the names of coalitions in Texas (Citizens Against Government Interference), Minnesota (Minnesota Coalition of Responsible Retailers), Michigan (Michigan Citizens for Fair Taxes), and Maine & Vermont (Grocers Associations). Much of the activity is coordinated by the Ram Hurst Corporation says Mother Jones. I am sending you a copy of part of the long expose. So, it wouldn't exactly be news. I'll send that today and I hope you'll reconsider going public. Meanwhile, how did you get to know Mr. RJR?"

Mr. X:

"Mr. RJR is one of the principals in Ram Hurst."

Pete:

"According to Mother Jones, James Ellis (formerly of the Free Congress Foundation) is the President and Doug Goodyear (a former GOP operative in Colorado and New Jersey) is the vice president and treasurer of Ram Hurst.

So my guess is that Mr. RJR is Doug Goodyear because with his former GOP connection he probably knows Bill Owens well."

You also wrote that Mr. RJR is a friend. Political friend, former neighbor, business's friend, relative?"

Mr. X:

"Cannot confirm."

Note: That ended our series of e-mail exchanges.