



# All a-*Twitter*

Lobbyists, PR professionals, and others in Washington's influence industry are getting hip to the power of social networking.

■ By Eliza Newlin Carney

**W**hen a housing industry lobbyist asked Washington consultant Pat Cleary to help him set up a *Twitter* feed during the economic stimulus debate earlier this year, Cleary was dubious.

Cleary's 17-year-old daughter thought the idea of her dad on a social-networking site was "hilarious," he recalls. And the whole *Twitter* premise—that participants post 140-character updates that answer the question, "What are you doing?"—struck Cleary as a tad incomprehensible.

"Why anyone would care that I'm having a coffee at Caribou is beyond me," says Cleary, senior vice president of digital public affairs at the communications firm Fleishman-Hillard. "It's more inane than blogging, if that's possible. It's life in 140 characters. I don't get it."

But it didn't take long for Cleary to become a convert. Members of the Fix Housing First coalition had mounted a campaign to include a tax credit for homebuyers in the economic stimulus legislation. Cleary launched the group's *Twitter* feed a week before Congress voted on the stimulus package in February, and coalition Executive Director Ken Gear "tweeted" minute-by-minute updates from his BlackBerry as he rushed around Capitol Hill.

The updates attracted 300 followers the very first day and helped gin up thousands of e-mails to the Hill, Cleary says. Bottom line: The stimulus legislation included an \$8,000 tax credit for new homebuyers, among other changes the coalition had sought. Cleary declares, "We will never be involved in another legislative battle without *Twitter*."

Welcome to the brave new world of lobbying via social networking. As Americans of all ages flock to interactive websites such as *Facebook*, *MySpace*, *YouTube*, and *Flickr*—sharing gossip, jokes, home videos, and snapshots with their friends and colleagues—lobbyists are logging on. Like their children and grandchildren before them, K Street professionals are finding that social networks hold both promise and peril.

President Obama's tech-savvy use of social networks to build a political following that included 13 million campaign donors is now the model that all Washington policy players—candidates and K Streeters alike—are emulating. For lobbyists and other advocacy experts already making ever-greater use of grassroots coalitions to lean on Capitol Hill, the power of social networks is irresistible. They cost virtually nothing; they invite two-way communication with supporters; they spread messages far and wide thanks to viral technology; and they create buzz.

"This is a huge cultural shift—for industry, for lobbying firms—because just about everything has changed," says Joe Trippi, who pioneered the use of online



■ Pat Cleary

**The veteran public-affairs consultant was skeptical of *Twitter* until he used it to help a client during the stimulus debate.**

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technology as campaign manager for Howard Dean's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004. If a lobbying organization had 13 million followers, as Obama now has, Trippi says, "they'd win every time."

Indeed, the idea that Obama has steered the army of advocates that flocked to *my.barackobama.com* over to a new Democratic National Committee site, *Organizing for America*, makes some lobbyists nervous. Veteran lobbyists unfamiliar with the rules, rhythm, and lingo of social networks worry that the new organizer-in-chief could out-lobby them. That fear alone is forcing even the most-buttoned-down corporate representatives and lobbyists to surf the Web.

If Obama really can persuade his followers to weigh in on policy debates, says R. Bruce Josten, executive vice president of government affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "it would give him a viral lobbying machine that would rival, if not exceed, any interest group in the country." The chamber has a *Facebook* page now, where visitors can check out *YouTube* videos attacking labor-backed legislation that would make it easier for workers to unionize.

"Technology is going to forever change the way we interface with Congress," says Geoff Ziebart, executive director of the National Association of Business PACs. "The minute President Obama mobilizes those 13 million donors, how ironic that he will have created 13 million lobbyists."

There's a big difference, of course, between firing up followers on the campaign

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trail and getting them to engage in policy debates. Sites like *Facebook* are more useful to some campaigns than to others, say Internet technology experts, and they favor passion-driven causes. Progressive groups that champion saving endangered animals or rain forests, for example, tend to fare better on the Web than do corporate players with a top-down culture of tight message control.

"I think the social Web favors public-interest issues, public goods over private interests and private goods," notes Alan Rosenblatt, associate director of online advocacy at the Center for American Progress Action Fund.

"There are certain issues that can be lobbied, and there are certain issues that can't," concurs Doug Pinkham, president of the Public Affairs Council. "One of the first things you have to keep in mind is, these social networks are social. People go to them generally for a social experience—here's my rock band, here are my kids, here I am traveling in the Alps." He adds: "If you go on these sites and start proselytizing about your cause in a very hard-core way, you're going to turn a lot of people off."

Still, corporate heavyweights are also playing the social-networking game. General Electric, which has its own *Facebook* page, recently participated in *Facebook's* popular "25 Random Things" meme. (Participants would list 25 random things about themselves and pass it on, chain-letter-style.) GE's Random Things included such chatty entries as "GE Security secures the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty" and "We actually like it when Alec Baldwin skewers us on *30 Rock*."

"These things on their own don't really influence legislation," Pinkham says. "But they change the public debate, they create a buzz. And that changes the political dialogue."

Pinkham's group handed out two of its three so-called Grassroots Innovation Awards this year to trade associations that had exploited social networks. One went to the Entertainment Software Association, which invited average gamers to post snapshots with an anti-regulation message on *Flickr*, a photo-sharing website. The posts, which included gamers in masks and costumes, "became hugely popular and very entertaining," Pinkham notes. The other went to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, which used

social-networking components in its "I Am Smoke-Free" project.

Social networking poses dangers, too. Take America's Health Insurance Plans, which geared up for this year's health care debate with a bottom-up "listening tour," complete with a toll-free telephone number that invited Americans to call with their health care concerns.

Health Care for America Now, a labor-backed progressive coalition pushing for public insurance, fought back with a humorous *YouTube* video that mercilessly skewered the AHIP campaign. In it, a caller dials the AHIP 800 number, but a perky voice-mail message kicks in. The annoyed caller, who identifies himself as "Bob, from Detroit," complains that he has called five times that day, and chides: "If you really want to listen, pick up the phone!"

The video, which got 2,702 hits, "actually didn't cost us anything besides staff time," says Levana Layendecker, director of online campaigns for Health Care for America Now.

AHIP spokesman Robert Zirkelbach counters that the video "was not an accurate representation [of] how the number worked... We responded to everybody that called in to that number, and engaged them directly." AHIP's own online Campaign for an American Health Solution has attracted some 100,000 followers, according to Zirkelbach. Still, the dustup underscores the difference between the one-way medium of TV, which defined advocacy 15 years ago, and the more unpredictable, three-dimensional world of social networks.

"It can backfire," James A. Thurber, director of the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University, says of social-network advocacy. "You're wired 24/7. You've got to be quick, and you've got to be clever."

Some corporate and business groups accustomed to screening every public statement resist the talk-back nature of the Internet and the blogosphere, where anyone can post anything, positive or negative. Experts say that the average American is better at using social networks than most elected officials or lobbyists are.

Social networking also allows more players to join Washington's already crowded advocacy world. The Genocide Intervention Network, for example, started as a handful of Swarthmore College students communicating on social networks. It's now a full-fledged lobbying organization, complete with a targeted divestment campaign, a toll-free hotline, and a congressional scorecard on Darfur.

"The message-control environment is now chaotic," says Rosenblatt of the CAP Action Fund. "The tools that are available to advocacy and to political campaigns are also available to the audience. Within that context, strategies have to take the approach of managing chaos, rather than tight message control."

Many lobbyists remain skeptical, as Cleary was at first. But others maintain that fighting social networks is futile. Virtually every issue and organization comes up for discussion in Web forums and chat rooms anyway, they argue, so lobbyists might as well join the conversation. That may knock a few advocacy groups off their pedestals, but some observers argue that is a good thing.

"Lobbying firms and industry groups are realizing that it's important to get people back in the process, that people are more important than money," Trippi says. "I think it's healthy." ■

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