

The 'Rasslin Business:

Advice for being a champion lobbyist

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If you know anything about me, you know that nearly every time I provide examples of how life works, I relate it back to either Star Wars or Wrestling. This brief story of how I came to be a Government Affairs Manager with Gentry Locke Consulting and the tips I have for those thinking about pursuing it as a career could have easily been structured around the taxation of trade routes or the creation of a clone army, but this time, the bell rang.

I attended James Madison University, alma mater of the voice of wrestling Tony Schiavone, intent on becoming a social studies teacher. In the fall of 2010, during my junior year, two events altered my career path. The first was when I participated in JMU's Washington Semester, a "study abroad" program where students live and work as interns in the nation's capital. I was lucky enough to work in a Congressional office and get hands-on experience in how an elected official's office functions.



The second event was when I watched the satirical film "Thank You for Smoking," starring Aaron Eckhart as tobacco lobbyist Nick Naylor. Before the credits rolled, I knew that was the job I wanted. Nick wasn't a man driven by the passions of his own personal politics. He identified solutions to problems and solved them, that's all. Additionally, he won with his intellect, much like my favorite characters across mediums: Grand Admiral Thrawn, Ric Flair, Khan Noonien Sigh, or Batman.

Following graduation, I interned in two Virginia Delegate offices before jumping on to work on campaigns as a lowly door knocker at the suggestion of a Congressional Chief of Staff with whom I had interviewed. The member was retiring in 6 months, and it was his advice to go into the world of campaigns.

The track was obvious and direct in my mind. If I wanted to be a lobbyist, I needed to work in an elected official's office to learn the issues, people, and process; if I wanted to be in an official's office, I needed to work on a campaign to pay my dues and show I could work hard. After a few campaigns, I was able to join the office of Virginia Senator Tommy Norment, where I worked for eight years. During my time in his office, he was Minority Leader, Majority Leader, and Minority Leader again. This was a tremendous learning experience for me because of the number of people I could meet and the amount of issues I could impact. Finally, in November of 2021, I landed at Gentry Locke, where I was able to test the ideas of what I thought a lobbyist should be with the realities of working in government affairs. I had my eureka moment where I felt that the job had become apparent, and my brain translated into a wrestling quote.

Vince McMahon tells the story of receiving a phone call from Ted Turner following his purchase of rival company, World Championship Wrestling (WCW), where Ted said, "Guess what, Vince, I'm in the 'rasslin' business." Vince responded, "That's nice, Ted; I'm in the sports entertainment business."



This change in mindset hit me about a year and a half into working as a lobbyist, and this quote led me to write the article you are currently reading. Both WWE (then WWF) and WCW were wrestling companies that employed wrestlers to wrestle. If you jumped from one company to the other, which happened frequently in the mid-90s to early 00s, you, as a wrestler, did the exact same job. You cut promos explaining how you would win your next match, and then, at some point, the bell rang, a match occurred, and the story continued. While all the wrestlers need to be able to grapple, only those who can differentiate themselves as must-see attractions are able to rise to the main event. All persons in Government Affairs must develop the basic skill set expected to lobby. Still, it matters little how much of an expert you are in a given policy area if you have no one to represent on those issues.

This subtle difference in perspective makes all the difference. The wrestling business is not about wrestling; it's about promotion. Fans want to see the heel (bad guy) lose and the face (good guy) win. People do not buy tickets to see "Das Wunderkid" Alex Wright and Norman Smiley in the opening match of a random WCW Thunder. They want to see Stone Cold Steve Austin vs. The Undertaker in a Buried Alive Match for the right to compete in the Royal Rumble following weeks of build. To run a successful wrestling business and be successful in government affairs you need to 1) be a promoter, 2) have a gimmick, and 3) grab the brass ring.



Be a Promoter

The number of times you have probably heard someone utter the career advice of "network" or "client acquisition" is undoubtedly countless. Rarely do I recall anyone expanding on what precisely that meant. I think a better word is "promote". Merely going to a cocktail hour and leaving with a few new business cards will only get you so far. Being a promoter is an intentional business strategy. You need a vision to develop your roadmap to success and measurable goals. You should find policy areas that interest you or your clients and create a targeted approach to build your network around these policy areas.

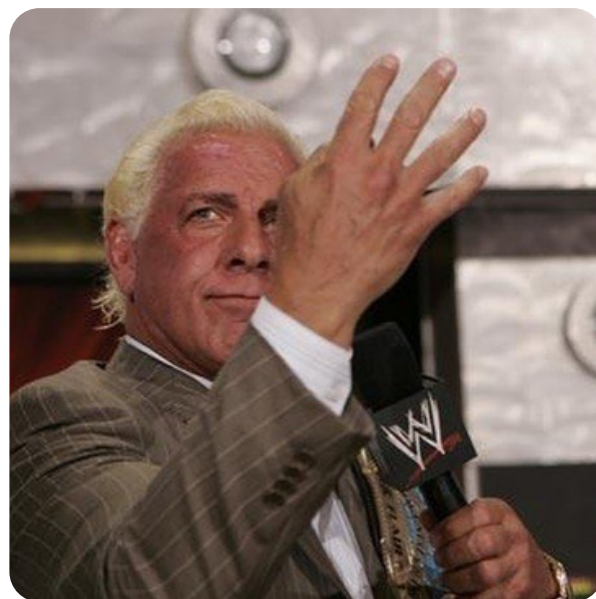
WWE knows a year in advance what they want the main event of next year's WrestleMania to be, and then they book (plan) storylines backward to that end. This path is rarely a straight line. Throughout the year, each wrestler will have various feuds to highlight their skills and character before reaching the final opponent on the biggest stage. Write down precisely what you want to do and have a trackable list to update regularly. How many meetings do you want to have, and with whom? Which conferences would you like to attend? Which policy areas would you like to learn more about? Write it down and check it regularly. Get creative and find other avenues to highlight your skills and knowledge, such as convincing your boss that an article comparing lobbying to wrestling is a good idea.

You're not a lobbyist; you're a promoter. Learn how to promote yourself, your firm, and your clients.

Have a Gimmick

A wrestler's gimmick, a.k.a. persona, is what promoters use to craft their storylines. How can you promote yourself if you don't have a gimmick? How can you effectively network if you don't know who you are or what you want to be?

One good exercise to assess your strengths and weaknesses is to see where your skills are in "The Four Ps": People, Process, Politics, and Policy. These are the different areas where you can develop an idea of what you offer clients. You will likely only be an expert in some of these. Imagine them as character stats in a role-playing game. You only have so many skill points that you can allocate to each attribute, but you do have the ability to level up. Below are some items to consider when self-evaluating where you provide value and what needs improvement.



- **People:** Do you know people in and around the government? Legislative aides, elected officials, administrative assistants, bureaucrats, business owners, political operatives, lobbyists, and various staff members. The people within your network are an asset to you and your clients.
- **Process:** Do you know how a bill becomes a law? How are budget amendments submitted and tracked? How does the Administrative Process Act work? What is FOIA? What commissions and boards meet outside of session, and what is their focus?
- **Politics:** Which parties are in charge? What elections are coming up? What are the likely stances of the parties on particular issues? What is the global political climate? What issues are important to a member's local district?
- **Policy:** What are the discussion points surrounding a policy area? What are federal and state laws currently governing this issue? Where can tweaks be made for the betterment of a client? What should the written word of the law be?

Figure out which areas you are adept at and where you can focus on honing your abilities. This will improve your value and confidence to deliver. This concept was explained to me years ago, and I have used it constantly. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this nugget.

Lastly, I cannot stress this enough: get a hobby. You need interest outside of work. The benefits of stress relief in what can be a high-stress environment are apparent, but it will also help you with your work. There are a lot of events to hit on the circuit and a lot of time spent sitting in committee waiting for the Chair to gavel in. If you don't have anything outside of work to talk about, those will be long days, and without outside interest to relate to your peers and officials, you will put a ceiling on your ability to truly connect on a personal level.

Grab the Brass Ring

Another reported "Vince-ism" was talking about wrestlers themselves winning over the crowd and taking advantage of the opportunities provided to them: grab the brass ring. This is probably the most cliché and easiest to control. Say yes to new opportunities to learn and grow. One connection you make might lead to three more, and one of those might lead to a client. Would you like to take on this client issue? Yes. Would you like to attend this conference? Yes. Will you drive to the district office on the other side of the state to meet? Yes. In Virginia, sessions only last 45-60 days, which means there are about ten months of the year for you to grow and develop.

There is no one way to lobby, and I do not proclaim to be an all-knowing industry sage. This is the advice I would give to and have given to people who have asked my opinion about becoming a lobbyist. I hope this information is helpful, and thank you for taking the time to read this article. I hope it was as enjoyable to read as it was to write.