Commentary

Framing lobbying messages: defining and communicating political issues persuasively

Conor McGrath*
Cuilin Mara, Seafront Terrace, Sandymount, Dublin 4, Republic of Ireland

- The concept of product positioning is well established in the commercial communication sphere, as are the notions of issue definition and agenda setting in the field of political science. Less thoroughly researched, though, is an area which intersects these two fields—the way in which lobbyists use language in order to frame policy issues so as to position their organization and its policy preferences to greatest effect. Lobbyists consciously frame and define issues in an effort to encourage policy makers both to share the lobbyist's perspective on a given policy problem, and to suggest to those policy makers what policy solution ought to be adopted. In doing so, they explicitly draw from ideas and practices more commonly associated with other forms of commercial communication such as advertising and marketing. This paper suggests that the use of language by lobbyists is a potentially fruitful field for both academics and practitioners interested in political communication broadly defined—indeed, lobbying is essentially a form of persuasive communication in the political arena. It is well understood that how political issues are presented is an important factor in the extent to which an issue will be supported; this paper focuses on how lobbyists make use of this understanding in their efforts to achieve a desired policy outcome.

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Introduction

There is a wealth of research by now both from the commercial communication sphere about the value of product positioning, and from the political science field about how the public policy agenda is set or established (particularly in terms of the media and public opinion). One topic, though, which intersects these two areas, has been largely ignored in the academic literature although it is tremendously significant for practitioners—how lobbyists use language consciously to frame policy issues in such a way as to position their organization and its policy preferences to greatest effect. As Gerrity (2006) notes: 'A frame can assign blame, define a problem, point out the cause, or imply a solution'. Perhaps the most influential PR text
yet written suggests that, ‘lobbyists attempt to focus attention on issues, facts, and appeals that will lead to acceptance of their client’s point of view’ (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). This paper considers how lobbyists frame messages in such a way as to achieve this focus.

In her work on child abuse, Nelson (1984) suggested that political agenda setting is the process, ‘where those issues which will receive governmental attention are chosen from among those issues which could receive governmental attention’ (emphasis in the original); increasingly, lobbyists and their framing of policy issues are a significant factor in this process. A recent paper by a group of American academics posed the question, ‘Why do politicians, media gatekeepers and vast segments of the population care about and devote their energy and attention to some social problems but not others?’ before concluding that the ‘answers tend to rest less with the objective characteristics of social problems themselves and more with the power, resources and skills of those who seek to mold public sentiment about them’ (Salmon et al., 2003). Similarly, one study of the communication techniques used by activist groups suggests that:

Social advocates can influence the adoption of policy positions by government. Social movement communication can impact policy, given appropriate social and political opportunity afforded by context, indirectly, through affecting public opinion or accepted perceptual frameworks around various issues, or more directly, through communication with policy-makers (McHale, 2004; emphasis added).

Framing issues in persuasive communications

A well-established principle underpinning much commercial communication (such as marketing and advertising) suggests that effective positioning of a product is key to success. This tends to involve associating the product in the minds of consumers with desirable or favourable attributes or connotations. A business academic asserts that, ‘“Ownership” of words or images in the minds of outside parties can represent a form of organizational capital’ (Heugens, 2002)—for instance in terms of brand building or, as this paper suggests, lobbying. As one marketing book puts it: ‘Positioning is ... the process of designing an image and value so that customers within the target segment understand what the company or brand stands for in relation to its competitors’ (Wilson and Galligan, 2005).

Jobber and Fahy (2003) assert that effective positioning requires that the idea expressed be a simple and straightforward one—examples abound, but a couple serve to illustrate the point: ‘It is. Are you?’ (The Independent newspaper in the UK), ‘We try harder’ (Avis rental cars) and ‘Because I’m worth it’ (L’Oreal beauty products). All these slogans say something about the organization or product, in a direct and clear way. In essence, they help to clarify for the consumer what the product is like, and by doing so they hope to encourage the consumer to identify with the product’s ‘personality’. None of these slogans would work commercially unless consumers feel confident that the image matches up to the reality of the product.

In an early issue of this journal, an American academic (Terry, 2001) explains the relevance of framing to political lobbying through an analysis of communication theory, in particular symbolic convergence theory (SCT). Having noted that SCT holds that people seek to establish a shared perception through the use of symbolic ‘facts’, she goes on to describe how lobbyists consciously employ storytelling in the course of their direct lobbying of policy makers. Focusing in particular upon what SCT terms ‘fantasy themes’ (which Terry (2001) defines as the ‘messages contained within the drama the stories tell’), she describes how lobbyists for Texan physicians built their efforts around an overarching slogan, ‘Physicians Caring For Texans’. This dominant frame was then used to redefine technical debates about medical liability into more persuasive...
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terms relating to the quality of patient care—the Bill which emerged was titled the Patient Protection Act. This follows the advice given by Mack (1997) who instructs that, 'Issues should be framed to show how the public benefits from your side of the argument. Don’t go public with a narrow, self-serving issue'. The precise content and mode of delivery of organizational messages matter in lobbying, as in all other forms of persuasive communication. One public relations textbook emphasizes that:

Messages are often underestimated, but they are vitally important and can’t just be flung together.... They are the point of contact between an organization and its publics in communication terms.... Messages and the way they are conveyed are the starting point of the thinking, attitude or behavioral change that the organization is seeking. Badly done, they can be the end point too (Gregory, 2000).

According to one writer, the process of framing an issue is essentially, 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretations, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendations for the item described' (Entman, 1993). Much the same meaning is expressed by Watkins et al. (2001) thus: 'Framing is the use of argument, analogy and metaphor to create a favourable definition of the problem to be solved and the set of acceptable solutions'. These frames then form the basis of how a particular policy issue is viewed, and thus influence how that issue will be dealt with by policy makers: lobbyists (on all sides of any issue) will attempt to frame or define the issue in such a way as to suggest that their particular perspective is the correct one. As one writer puts it, 'Alternative frames affect judgments by stressing specific considerations, making certain values or facts more accessible and giving them relative importance', (Joslyn, 2003). In their study of policy agendas in American politics, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) note that:

Competing images may emerge from a given set of conditions, especially when policymakers believe that different policy outcomes will follow from different understandings of what the facts mean... Competing participants attempt to manipulate them to suit their needs. Since a given policy typically has many different implications, it can be linked with many competing images.... Political struggle, then, involves conflict over the definition of policy images.

Public policy issues (the focus of lobbying efforts) tend to be complex, involving an array of both factors and alternatives; framing is an attempt by lobbyists to set the boundaries of debate on a given issue. In a 'how-to' guide to Washington lobbying (Wittenberg and Wittenberg, 1989), the very first piece of advice offered is to, 'Define the issue. Naturally, your issue is of overriding importance. But in order to get on the agenda in Washington you must make it understandable'. Similarly, another guide suggests that, 'Behind every issue is a morass of detail and nuance that must be reduced to a central theme leading to one unyielding conclusion: support for your initiative is the right choice' (Wolpe and Levine, 1996). So, for instance, Rosenthal (2001) notes that, 'In the battle over restricting smoking in public places, the proponents of the ban referred to the bill as 'The Clean Indoor Air Bill', while the opponents called it 'The Smoking Restriction Bill'}. In a similar vein, one practitioner notes the importance of 'using exactly the right words to name or position the issue' (Jacques, 2004), and gives the example of the way in which activists on both sides of the abortion debate have chosen to label themselves either 'pro-choice' or 'pro-life', rather than 'pro-abortion' or 'anti-abortion'. Indeed, abortion policy has long been a forum in which interest groups are keenly aware of the value of framing—Goldman (2006) asserts that the fundamental shift

towards abortion reform in the United States came in the late 1960s as a result of the issue being framed as a human right rather than, as it had been until then, being centred around arguments to do with the health or welfare of the pregnant woman.

David Rehr—then the President of the National Beer Wholesalers Association (NBWA) in Washington—has told the author that positioning an issue:

*is the idea of thinking through in fifteen words or less why someone would want to be for it. You don't have to get complicated. I always like to bounce my ideas off someone who knows nothing about my business and see if they can get it. If the average person gets it then I think the average Member of Congress or the average media person probably gets it too. But I don't think enough people spend enough time thinking about positioning the issue.*

Similarly, the campaigning organization Friends of the Earth advises its members about the importance of conciseness: *'Try to write down the basics of your message in one or two short sentences. It will help strip away all the secondary details about the issue you are working on and arrive at something snappy that will grab attention in the shortest possible time'* (Gilligan and Watson, 2000).

An Irish lobbyist agrees that the way in which an issue is framed or defined is key to a lobbying campaign’s effectiveness: *'Complex arguments, scientific formula and so on, should generally be avoided. If an argument can be encapsulated into a simple phrase or slogan, so much the better. If that phrase is emotional in character, even better again'* (Tierney, 2002).

Another example of the way in which lobbyists consciously think about how a message can be formulated and delivered is given by a Washington consultant who told the author:

*How this relates to lobbying can be seen by looking at an example. For instance, the President’s decision to impose tariffs on steel imported into the United States. The largest US steel manufacturers were adamant that these tariffs be set at 40% and not the 30% that was being proposed... We need somebody who can talk—not about a steel tariff, because that is a bad message—but rather we want to talk about a good message, which is the illegal behavior of foreign steel companies. We need to make this about punishing the illegal behavior of foreign steel companies. The positioning on this issue has to be pro-American, pro-US jobs, pro-US industry. So we visit every major newspaper in the country and outline in great detail the illegal behavior of foreign steel companies. Stories are best told in the US media by anecdote, so that people can grasp the issues. Our favorite was that Korean steel manufacturers were sending barges over to Seattle, picking up scrap metal, paying for it, shipping it back to Korea, turning it into finished steel products, importing it back into the US and selling it for less than they paid for the scrap metal. There is no way that that can be profitable. Somebody is subsidizing them somewhere along the line. Our message then becomes that they need to be punished; that steel has got to be taxed when it comes back into the United States because they are protecting jobs in Korea by dumping steel in the United States. The classic account of how organizations can frame their messages to best competitive effect remains the book by Al Ries and Jack Trout, Positioning: The Battle For Your Mind, first published in 1981. One of the core elements of their advice is to focus on how your communications are received: ‘You have to sharpen your message to cut into the mind. You have to jettison the ambiguities, simplify the message, and then simplify it some more if you want a long-lasting impression’ (Ries and Trout, 2001).*
The NBWA’s David Rehr has asserted to the author that this book by Ries and Trout, ‘was the basis for this whole [lobbying] strategy we put together’. As one marketing textbook suggests, Ries and Trout, ‘who in the eyes of many are the founding fathers of positioning theory, argue that positioning is first and foremost a communication strategy’ (Wilson and Galligan, 2005). It is therefore useful at this point to review the extent to which political lobbying can be considered as a form of communication, before moving on to explore how lobbyists frame issues and position the organizations which they represent.

**Lobbying as a form of political communication**

One of the most influential and frequently cited definitions of lobbying is that offered by Milbraith (1963) who asserted that: ‘lobbying is the stimulation and transmission of a communication, by someone other than a citizen acting on his own behalf, directed to a governmental decision-maker with the hope of influencing his decision’. In the words of an Austrian lobbyist, ‘lobbying is generally defined as a communication instrument especially targeted to political decision-making authorities’ (Koeppl, 2001). And Wilson (1973) has gone so far as to state that: ‘It is now well understood that what an organizational representative does in furthering his group’s interests before government has more to do with his management of a communications system than with his exercise of influence’.

If lobbying is intimately concerned with communication as these writers suggest, we would expect that lobbyists themselves pay careful attention to the language and forms of words that they use in their communication with policy makers. So, for instance, Anne Wexler (a Washington consultant) has told the author that: ‘the people who are good at lobbying are those who are good at finding ways to tell their story most effectively. Communication and communication tools overlay virtually every lobbying opportunity’. Similarly, Howard Marlowe (a former President of the American League of Lobbyists) has told the author that, ‘In presenting a client’s case, our approach is one that I call “advocacy journalism”. We want to present the essential facts with an appropriate spin which emphasizes the strengths of our client’s position’. A London-based lobbyist, Michael Burrell, described to the author how particular words can help to frame a lobbying campaign:

> I had a client once who made audio tape machines and tapes. For reasons to do with artists’ copyright the British government proposed to put a levy on the sale of blank audio tape, so every time you bought some blank audio tape it would cost more because there would be this levy which would be used to re-distribute money to musicians.... We decided that what the government was proposing was not a ‘levy’, it was a ‘tax’, and we launched a campaign against this tax.

Michael Fulton, a Washington lobbyist has told the author how crafting the precise language used in lobbying messages can be undertaken in practice:

> We will engage in developing messages to achieve what the client wants to do.... Then we like to test those messages in some format. If Congress is our end audience, we can go see some of our friends up on Capitol Hill and say, ‘How does this strike you? Are you aware of this issue? Are you getting any mail on it? What would you think if the company did A, B or C?’ We bring this feedback back to the office and it gives us a read of what people think on Capitol Hill. Sometimes we develop scenario videos that simulate an issue, and say, ‘What did you think of that?’ Then we will them our client’s side of things through another simulated video and say, ‘After watching this does it change your mind? Does it give you the other side of the issue in a way that you understand it?’ We try to
see if that turns them around or moves the needle at all. If it does not then we need to go back to the drawing board a little bit; if it does then we will implement it.

One lens through which the communicative element of lobbying can be explored lies in the field of political marketing. Political marketing has become an increasingly popular area for academic research over the last decade in both the USA and UK. However, study of the relationship between political marketing and lobbying is a relatively small sub-set of this general field. A lengthy review of the political marketing literature by Scannell (1999), for instance, makes no direct mention of interest groups. As Harris (1999) has remarked: 'The impact of corporate lobbying as a form of marketing communication is largely unresearched and this is rarely mentioned in the literature.' Moreover, searching through the relatively small amount of political marketing literature on lobbying reveals that even that work tends to focus on questions around the recruitment and retention of members and the provision of benefits to members by groups. Relatively little research has been undertaken to date on how political marketing theory can explain or illustrate the representation of interests by lobbyists or their policy-influencing activities.

One writer asserts that, 'Government relations is, in a sense, a specialized form of marketing. In that same sense, direct lobbying is often face-to-face selling' (Mack, 1997). An American writer described lobbying in terms of its similarities to marketing thus: 'Organizing support for a position on an issue is similar to planning a marketing campaign. Selling the policy issue in the government marketplace is parallel to selling a product or service. It is essential to plan, package, and present the issue to convince the decision maker, often a legislator or a government policymaker' (Fraser, 1982). And some lobbyists themselves recognize the connection here—for instance, David Rehr, then the President of the NBWA in America, has told the author that he sees a direct connection between marketing and lobbying: 'Basically we are marketing and selling a product: it is a Bill, or a regulatory regulation, or something that we want from the government, or something that we want the government not to do to us'.

In a paper which undoubtedly helped to stimulate the academic thinking which later developed as political marketing, Kotler and Levy (1969) observed that marketing involves more than simple, direct, transactions of goods or services; rather, it is concerned with the more general (even sometimes indirect and intangible) exchange of commodities (including ideas). How this relates to lobbying is illustrated by Jaatinen (1999) who asserts that: 'The first condition of democratic lobbying is that its main characteristic is information exchange' (emphasis in the original). As two American observers of lobbying put it, 'The public-affairs profession is engaged in the development, creation, packaging and marketing of ideas and opinions, rather than products or services' (Berkowitz and Feulner, 1996). It is this notion that ideas can be marketed which underpins an examination of how lobbyists market their policy preferences.

**Branding as a lobbying tool**

The importance for a lobbying organization of branding itself is effectively illustrated by David Rehr, then President of the NBWA. He firmly believes in the importance of being able to use a single logo and strap line in all of NBWA's communications—if Representatives and Senators already have a mental impression of an organization before being approached by that group on any particular issue, they will be more likely to absorb the message being delivered. The slogan Rehr devised for NBWA—'Family Businesses Distributing America's Beverage'—not only defines the fundamental point about beer wholesalers in a way which is easily mentally retained, but also has the effect of protecting NBWA's policy interests:

*It's tough to be against family businesses in America, and when you say beer is
America's beverage, it is a lot tougher to be against beer. We stay away from the word 'alcohol'. That is a negative word in public opinion. 'Beer' is a positive word so we talk about beer. Moreover, NBWA members are all small business people so we emphasize the small business aspect.

Rehr's general philosophy provides a sense of unity and coherence to all NBWA's detailed statements and positions. The consistency of this simple 'bottom line' self-image underpins the association's entire government affairs strategy.

Lobbying organizations often go to some lengths to devise a title which frames themselves and their issues in the best possible light (Mayer, 2007). A report by the Washington-based Advocacy Institute (1995) noted some examples, including: the Coalition for Health Insurance Choices, which purported to be a body representing consumers, but was actually funded by the health insurance companies; the group representing pesticide manufacturers changed its name from the National Agricultural Chemicals Association to the more positive-sounding American Crop Protection Association; Citizens for Sensible Control of Acid Rain, which was established by energy utility companies in an effort to defeat proposals to curb acid rain; and the Alliance for Energy Security, which was really a creation of the Natural Gas Suppliers Association in its campaign to lobby for deregulation of the industry. One example—which received considerable publicity at the time — was when the government of Kuwait paid millions of dollars to a Washington PR and lobbying firm in 1990 to provide political and public support for America to launch the first Gulf War against Saddam Hussein; the company's client was officially listed, not as the government of Kuwait, but rather as an apparently independent group called Citizens for a Free Kuwait. As one writer put it:

Very little money, of course, was going to come from either Kuwaiti or American citizens, and the adjective 'free' was something of a stretch in describing a country where there was no religious freedom, women had few rights, dissidents were arrested without trial and tortured, and all the power resided in a monarchical family headed by an Emir with literally dozens of wives (Trento, 1992).

One of the most insightful American satirists, Christopher Buckley, turned his gaze towards lobbying in a 1994 novel, Thank You For Smoking. In this novel, Nick Naylor is the lobbyist and chief spokesman of the Academy of Tobacco Studies—despite its academic/scientific name, the Academy is the trade association representing the major cigarette companies. Naylor, whose role as defender of the tobacco industry inevitably makes him one of the most harried and pressured lobbyists in Washington, lunches regularly with two friends who are lobbyists for other products frowned upon by the liberal consensus: Bobby Jay Bliss, a pro-gun advocate who works at, 'SAFETY, the Society for the Advancement of Firearms and Effective Training of Youth, formerly NRBAC, the National Right to Bear Arms Committee' (Buckley, 1994); and Polly Bailey, the chief spokesperson for the Moderation Council, 'formerly the National Association for Alcoholic Beverages, which represented the nation's distilled spirits, wine and beer industries' (Buckley, 1994).

While this fiction points to how organizations can use titles and language to mask their true intent, there is nothing inherently or absolutely wrong in a lobbying group attempting to use an organizational title which accurately reflects the group's concerns. The legitimate importance of an organization's name as a way of framing and defining its policy issues is well illustrated by Mike Beard, who runs the Washington-based Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. He told the author that:

We started out our life originally as the National Coalition to Ban Handguns — we wanted to eliminate them altogether — but that turned out to be neither a very politically nor policy-wise position to take,
so we changed the name to the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. More recent research has shown that we can significantly reduce gun violence through a series of less drastic policy changes. We still say that we support banning handguns and assault weapons, but right now our major goals are licensing, registration and universal background checks.

Clearly, these two alternative names for the organization define it in very different ways, with consequent differences in terms of its policy agenda. Similarly, Heaney (2006) refers to the identity confusion faced by the Health Industry Manufacturers Association ('The words “industry” and “manufacturers” in the organization’s name conjured images of heavy equipment and large warehouses', despite the fact that its membership included firms at the cutting edge of medical equipment) until it changed its title to AdvaMed: The Advanced Medical Technology Association. The titles of legislative measures can also be important in lobbying efforts, as one American scholar notes:

One way lobbyists get their points across is by labeling. What a bill is titled can matter enormously. One contract lobbyist recalled that he could not get occupational therapists the licensing bill they wanted. The title of their bill would have aroused every doctor in the state. 'They can have what they want', he explained, 'if they just call it something different'. That way, there would be little opposition at all (Rosenthal, 2001).

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One recent policy issue which has been a focus of the NBWA (and, indeed, of many other lobbying organizations) in America was repeal of the estate tax, under which property inherited upon death is taxed. This was significant for the NBWA because when a beer wholesaler died, his or her company was passed on to family members, but was subject to estate tax. Often, this meant that part or all of the business had to be sold in order to pay the estate tax. This legislative campaign illustrates the importance attached by the NBWA to framing issues in language which makes it easier for the public and legislators to support the association’s position. Originally, the NBWA (and other small business groups) referred to the issue as the ‘estate tax’, but found that this generated little interest among the American public (most of whom did not see themselves as being wealthy enough to have an ‘estate’); and so it began talking about ‘inheritance tax’, equally unsuccessfully. More recently, NBWA has campaigned to abolish the ‘death tax’, as this was felt to have more resonance with the public and legislators alike. This illustrates, in perhaps the most literal form, advice on framing given by one observer of lobbying in America: 'If a moral principle is at stake (e.g. discrimination or injustice), lead with it. Citizens understand that if it can happen to you, it could happen to them' (Mack, 1997). In this case, the lobbying message had to be repeatedly redefined until people understood that they would one day die just as beer wholesalers die.

An important reason why lobbyists take care to construct the most advantageous issue frames is that the frame itself can define not only the problem but also the solution. So, for instance, during the 1995 dispute between Greenpeace and Shell Oil over whether Shell should be allowed to dump the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Atlantic, one of Greenpeace’s key messages was to question why this ought to be acceptable when ‘no one has been able to dump their rusty old car in the local pond for more than 30 years’ (cited in Watkins et al., 2001)—this frame won significant media and public support for not just the identification of the problem but also the solution (i.e. that Shell should have to take the costlier route of dismantling the structure and disposing of it elsewhere). As one Washington consultant put it to the author: ‘Congress
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actually passes relatively little legislation, so unless you are the front page topic of the week, it is difficult to persuade Congress that this is the week to act on your concerns. You have to package the program, whatever the problem is and the solution'. Another has told the author that:

I think one of the things that we do better than anybody in this town is, at the start of a project, giving really sound strategic advice on the way in which the issue is framed—the issue message and the solution message in other words. I think that one of the ways in which we try to bring value to clients is by helping them frame the debate in a way that is going to maximize the likelihood of success.

A group of American academics illustrate this point when they argue (Salmon et al., 2003) that 'defining a social problem of violence in society in terms of violent content in films and TV programs automatically defines its solution: regulation of media content'. In a similar vein, Edelman (1977) suggests that a road safety public awareness campaign which encourages motorists to drive safely will tend to ignore other relevant factors such as poor design and manufacturing by car companies, high official speed limits, dangerous road construction and so on. He notes that: 'Whether or not a “drive safely” campaign makes drivers more careful, it creates an assumption about what the problem is and who is responsible for it that can only be partially valid.... This form of cognition is helpful to car manufacturers and to the highway lobby'.

An Irish lobbyist has suggested that: 'Political language works best, when it is emotively appealing and logically compelling. It must win both the hearts and the minds of the electorate' (Tiemney, 2002). A good example of how he applied this in practice is given in a case study of a lobbying campaign organized in Ireland in the 1980s—briefly, the Irish Restaurant Owners' Association had been attempting for 15 years to persuade successive governments to permit restaurants to serve Irish beer and spirits with meals (they were allowed to sell wine, but no wine was produced in Ireland, so all alcohol sold in restaurants was imported). Myles Tiemney, a Dublin lobbyist, was commissioned to take on this case, and within two years the law had been changed. The focal point of his lobbying efforts was a slogan, used on a range of literature (briefing papers, posters, beer, mats): 'Sorry, no Irish served here'. Recalling the history of racial discrimination often suffered in the past by Irish immigrants, this phrase captured the imagination of the public and policy makers alike, and indicated an irrational flaw in legislation. Harbourne (1995) quotes Tiemney as saying that as soon as this slogan was devised, 'I knew we had won. It was a lovely slogan. It powerfully demonstrated an obvious inequality'. A Brussels-based consultant argues that lobbyists in the EU, 'must learn how to balance rational arguments with emotionally appealing messages' (Tloody, 2003). This point is also made in the marketing literature: for instance, Wilson and Gilligan (2005) note that the breakfast cereal Special K provides consumers with both a 'functional purpose' (i.e. 'helps you to look good by helping you to manage your weight and shape') and an 'emotional promise' (i.e. 'the ally who helps you to feel good about yourself').

A recent paper suggests how lobbyists on different sides of an issue can use framing as a way of defining it and providing a message which is difficult to oppose:

For example, one advocacy group might label a social practice as 'female circumcision', while another might label the same practice as 'female genital mutilation'. Each group would attempt to get the media to use its terminology, thereby putting its opponent at a substantial disadvantage in subsequent policy debates. It is one thing to defend female circumcision as a cultural or religious practice, but quite another to defend mutilation; conversely, it is one
thing to oppose mutilation, but quite another to oppose long-standing cultural and religious rites (Salmon et al., 2003).

A similar example is given by Leech et al. who discuss American legislation to exempt the sale of products over the Internet from sales taxes: the Bill’s proponents argued that introducing such taxes would stifle the commercial growth and innovation of the Internet; while its opponents asserted that to leave Internet sales tax-exempt put traditional retailers—who did have to pass on sales taxes to their customers—at a competitive disadvantage, and moreover resulted in lost revenue and hence reduced services for state and local government. One of the anti-tax lobbyists is quoted in Leech et al. (2002) as saying that, ‘the other side has succeeded in reframing the debate away from taxpayer rights to government revenue and fairness issues’.

Lobbyists themselves recognize (even if grudgingly) when their opponents are particularly effective in terms of framing the policy issue which they contest. A good example is provided by Mike Beard of the US Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, who told the author that:

Most of the people who send money to my organization will say, ‘I think we should ban handguns, but of course it’s unconstitutional’. The Second Amendment is not a problem in terms of what it says; it’s a problem in terms of what people think it says.... The entire wording of the Second Amendment states: ‘A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed’. The National Rifle Association quotes the second half, they just simply talk about the right of the people to keep arms; they never talk about the first half of the Second Amendment. I think if we were just facing the amount of money the NRA have then we could beat them, but we can’t beat them in this belief that the gun is somehow protected by the Constitution of the United States.

Conclusion

The language with which any policy issue is framed can undoubtedly influence both how it is perceived and then how it is decided. As Leech et al. (2002) note: ‘The ways legislators and the public think about an issue can be a powerful force in determining how they will act. Thinking about a different aspect of a complex issue can lead people to change their minds’. What lobbyists seek to do when they frame an issue is to find a form of words which expresses the policy problem as they see it and suggests the policy solution which they desire. Having analysed a number of successful lobbying campaigns which employed effective issue-framing, Watkins et al. (2001) concluded that, 'By capturing the essence of their arguments in memorable, evocative catch phrases, skilful players were able to shape public opinion and hence bring pressure to bear on rule makers'.

Lobbyists are consciously employing techniques of positioning and branding more commonly associated with the fields of advertising and marketing. They do so precisely because they appreciate that at its heart lobbying is also an exercise in persuasive communication. As such, the attempt by lobbyists to frame policy issues and define policy solutions represents an important component of the process by which policymakers approach complex issues. Key to this attempt is an understanding of how to most effectively communicate lobbying messages. Further academic study of the precise nature of lobbying communications could yield valuable insights. As one writer suggests: ‘Both theoretically and in practice, understanding what lobbyists do symbolically, how they do it rhetorically, and who they are in terms of human communicators can contribute productively to the work of communication scholars and professionals alike’ (Terry, 2001). In a similar vein, Jaatinen (1999) argues that, ’Lobbying can be made more sophisticated only if more knowledge is generated from studying it as communication. Communications theory sheds light on questions
such as effectiveness of efforts to influence and the nature of interaction between groups'.

A number of areas for further research seem potentially fruitful: can insights from other forms of commercial communication such as advertising and marketing help to explain other facets of lobbying as well as framing? What lessons could be revealed if political marketing theory was used to analyse lobbying behaviour in a variety of settings and contexts? Do we understand lobbying more fully by examining it as primarily a form of corporate communication rather than in the more traditional mode of political science research? Can we develop and then test formal hypotheses about when and why lobbyists are most likely to focus on language as a way of framing their messages? How successful are interest groups at persuading policy makers to accept and adopt a preferred frame?

Biographical notes

Conor McGrath is now an Independent Scholar and was Lecturer in Political Lobbying and Public Affairs at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland from 1999 to 2006. Before becoming an academic, he previously worked for a Conservative Member of Parliament in the UK and for a Republican Congressman as Public Affairs Director at a public relations company, and as a self-employed lobbyist. His recent publications include Lobbying in Washington, London and Brussels: The Persuasive Communication of Political Issues (Edwin Mellen Press 2005); 'The Ideal Lobbyist: Personal Characteristics of Effective Lobbyists' (Journal of Communication Management, 2006) and 'Lobbying and Public Trust', in Tom Spencer and Conor McGrath (eds), Challenge and Response: Essays on Public Affairs and Transparency (Landmarks 2006). His current areas of research include the role of organizations which represent lobbyists, legislators with prior lobbying experience and popular perceptions of lobbying.

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