A week in the life of a Washington lobbyist

The K Street denizens aren't all Jack Abramoffs -- this one says he doesn't do anything unethical and represents his clients honestly.

By Toby Moffett
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I AM A Washington lobbyist.

In the 1970s and 1980s, I was a member of Congress, but I lost an election. These days, I'm back in D.C., where I spend my days trying to persuade my onetime colleagues to vote in the interests of my clients. I make a good living in the process.

No doubt you've heard all sorts of nasty things about lobbyists. But most of what you've heard is not true.

The fact is, I've lobbied all my adult life — as a member of "Nader's Raiders," as a member of the House from 1974 to 1982 (yes, members do lobby other members), as the leader of an anti-MX missile campaign later in the 1980s, as a corporate executive and, since 2000, as a member of a D.C. consulting firm.

I don't do anything unethical. I work hard, and I represent my clients honestly. Since I joined the consulting firm, I've learned that my status as a former member can get me in the door, but after that, if the facts aren't on my side or if I can't articulate them effectively, I'm in trouble. Especially if a constituent interest trumps mine.

In fact, members of Congress probably lobby me more than I lobby them. A look at a few of the events in a week in my lobbying life will show you why.

Monday

It's 8 a.m., and I'm in the Rayburn House Office Building cafeteria, talking to three staffers, all of whom work for New York members of Congress. Ah, the new, all-powerful New York delegation. Elections do matter! Having the Democrats — my party — back in the majority is intoxicating.

I'm talking about my clients, a group of construction companies that answered the call at Ground Zero after 9/11, working without insurance. Now they are being sued by workers who say they got sick as a result. If this is settled by lawsuits, the companies could go broke. "This was a national disaster," I say. "The feds need to put money in a fund and pay the claims."

These Democratic staffers agree. Now it's time to persuade President Bush to support this idea; it could be the first on the currently blank sheet of positive Bush legacy items. My Republican partner, Bob Livingston (a former congressman from Louisiana), is in charge of convincing Bush and the people around him of this. (I lobby only Democrats).

I leave Rayburn and sit outside on a bench, where I dial into a conference call. My client is a California firm that refinances student loans. On the call are student and consumer group leaders, part of a growing coalition taking on Sallie Mae and the big lenders that want to keep high-interest loans in their portfolios. We have a simple message: If you can refinance your home mortgage any time you want, why shouldn't you be able to do the same with your student loan?

During the call, I walk the few blocks back to my office and find eight faxes on my desk — all invitations to fundraising events for House members and senators. I also have two calls already this morning from lawmakers asking me to attend their fundraisers. The tab is usually the same: $2,500 for a political action committee; $1,000 for an individual. That's what I mean about them lobbying me.

Tuesday

Until the game is changed, we have to play in it. So I go to a fundraising breakfast at a restaurant near the Capitol. There are 12 of us sitting with a senator who will have a lot to say about legislation on climate change and energy. I'm there with a check from my client, a renewable energy company, and one from myself. The senator makes it clear to this group that it's a new day for renewables. I don't have any choice, really, but to attend his fundraiser: Somewhere else on Capitol Hill, Big Oil is writing checks for somebody else.

I leave and rush to the House side of the Capitol to meet another client, the ambassador from Morocco. We have a meeting with a key
member of the Appropriations Committee. Morocco has a good story to tell. It is a reliable friend of the U.S. It believes that the long-standing dispute with Algeria and the rebel Polisario group over the western Sahara must be resolved.

We tell the congresswoman and her staff that the region is becoming a possible Al Qaeda training area. Algeria and the Polisario recently hired lobbyists too, so we'll have our hands full. My idea is to sell this as a chance for Democrats to resolve a dispute in a critical region, in contrast to the president's utter failure to fix anything.

Wednesday

I have coffee in the House dining room with Joe Courtney, one of the new members from Connecticut (where my old district was located). I spent four months, full time, volunteering in his campaign. He was once a campaign staffer of mine, and now he's a freshman member. He won by fewer than 100 votes, so I'm doing everything possible to help him hire the very best constituent service staff.

He's now on the subcommittee dealing with student loans, but I don't have to lobby him; he's more outraged than I am about the big lenders.

By the way, helping the new Connecticut members, or even giving them campaign contributions, doesn't mean they'll do anything I ask. I recently drafted some questions for one of them to ask at a hearing on Ground Zero health effects, but when his time came, he never got around to my points. It didn't bother me. I know the pressure he's under. I know there are hundreds of issues, questions and complaints coming at him every day. Plus, I never told my client that the lawmaker might ask the questions, so I didn't raise expectations.

Tonight, I'm at a fundraiser for John Dingell (D-Mich.), who chaired a committee I served on when I was in the House. He's been reinstated as the chairman after 12 years of Republican rule, and he has some problems with the position that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has taken on climate change. A few years ago, I organized other former members to support him in a tough primary race. Off in the corner with me tonight, he vents; he's frustrated. I say, "You were always a great chairman, and you always will be, but you two have got to get a better relationship for the party's sake."

Thursday

We're trying desperately this morning to reach a client, Virgin Nigeria airline. A recent deal between the U.S. and the EU on international aviation rules could mean its application to provide direct service to and from the U.S. might be approved. We've mobilized the huge Nigerian American communities in Houston and New York, and we think the power of the Congressional Black Caucus could lead the Department of Transportation to approve direct flights.

Tonight, I go to the Capitol Hill home of Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), a senior member of the House. This is a dinner meeting that occurs every two weeks, involving about 15 current members and a few of us from the outside. The speakers tonight are the head of U.S. Steel and the head of the steelworkers union. They are in harmony: The Chinese are unfairly subsidizing their steel industry and hurting American workers.

Six months ago, this discussion wouldn't have meant that much, but now the Democrats are in control. I look around the room. There are at least eight committee or subcommittee chairmen there. I wonder: Do the Chinese know they're in for trouble?

Friday

This is as close as I come to going to war with a good friend. I have breakfast with the chief of staff of a prominent member of Congress who is trying to cut off U.S. government contracts to companies that "flee" the U.S. I am passionate about this. My client did nothing of the sort. It was always a global company, never a U.S.-based company. It was formerly headquartered in Switzerland, then made the decision, because its non-European partners wanted a non-U.S. address, to go to Bermuda. It got some tax benefits but still pays more tax on U.S. income than its competitors.

I leave thinking I've made a bit of progress. But with Democrats in control, they could do damage to this firm, and I don't think it's deserved.

In the afternoon, I go to my 14-year-old son's baseball game. There I run into a U.S. senator with whom I served in the House many years ago. His son plays for the other team.

He comes over to say hello. "Hey," he says, "how come you never come to see me about anything?"