

LESSONS IN LOBBYING

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Humorist Brian Unger attends a seminar on “How To Lobby Sacramento” with political veteran Ray LeBov. Unger then takes his new skills up to the State House.

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ALEX CHADWICK, host:

Back now with DAY TO DAY.

And back to California, where the state legislature in Sacramento is still trying to deal with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s budget plan. The governor’s proposing big budget cuts. He wants to close some state beaches and parks. He says the state need half a trillion dollars to repair infrastructure. All this means it’s a very good time to be a lobbyist.

And so we thought we better to learn lobbying that DAY TO DAY’s resident humorist Brian Unger. We sent Brian to Sacramento, and here is the Unger Report.

BRIAN UNGER: For 30 years, Ray LeBov work as chief lobbyist for California State Court System. Now in retirement, LeBov has shunned golf for a ceaseless devotion to teaching others how to lobby. I met up with Lebov in Sacramento.

Mr. RAY LeBOV (Lobbyist): We’re now between 11th and 12th on the K Street Mall, which is just a block from the capital.

UNGER: In a nearby office, LeBov gave me tutorial in Lobbying 101.

Who takes your class?

Mr. LeBOV: People who want to become lobbyists; people who have been lobbying just for a little while and are feeling like they really could do - be doing a much better job; people who hire lobbyists; people who support lobbyists; people who want to be better informed citizens and want to learn more about how the legislative process works even though they don’t have any intention of doing any lobbying.

UNGER: Estimates put the number of lobbyists in Washington as high as 40,000; across the 50 states almost 60,000, collectively paid billions to influence legislators who passed laws in favor of their corporate clients. So where did this all start?

Mr. LeBOV: There's some dispute over what - where the original lobby was.

UNGER: It is generally accepted that it was the lobby in the Willard Hotel in Washington where influencers of the Grant administration first got their names. Today, does one need a lobby to lobby?

Mr. LeBOV: Absolutely not.

UNGER: And so we began my private lesson in how to lobby a politician.

If I were a lobbyist, could I give cash, a check or a gift, like a trinket, like a keychain or a snow globe, or something like that?

Mr. LeBOV: I can't really speak to what people prefer. I would advise you first not to do it. If you were to do it, in all likelihood you would be apprehended for felonious conduct and you might very well be presented with the opportunity to use your lobbying skills in a very different context; that is, in a prison context.

UNGER: If I were to give cash, what denomination would I use? And would you give it in a briefcase, in a satchel, a tote bag, how would you give it?

Mr. LeBOV: I can't really comment on the best way to give it because the best thing to do is not to give it, because that's what the law requires.

UNGER: What constitutes lawful lobbying is tightly regulated in every state. What is unethical is not always black and white.

Mr. LeBOV: Go ahead. Do you want anything? I would like...

UNGER: You know, you can't buy me any coffee.

Mr. LeBOV: Oh.

UNGER: I mean I'm a journalist and you're a lobbyist.

(Soundbite of laughter)

UNGER: Do you mind being our witness?

Unidentified Woman: I don't think so.

UNGER: Well, he's not going to buy me anything. And I'm not going to buy him anything, okay?

Mr. LeBOV: We're going to pay for...

Unidentified Woman: Okay.

Mr. LeBOV: I would like a small vanilla ice cream.

Unidentified Woman: Small vanilla ice cream?

Mr. LeBOV: Yes.

UNGER: LeBov and other lobbyists say their function is a constitutionally protected one and that it is every citizen's right to readdress grievances with government.

What if Brian Unger wanted a lobbyist?

Mr. LeBOV: You could get your own lobbyists.

UNGER: Would I need to get an issue, then go get a lobbyist? Or do I get a lobbyist and then find an issue?

Mr. LeBOV: Well, I don't know why you would want to have a lobbyist if you didn't have an issue.

UNGER: Yeah. I would want someone who's relatively cheap, someone who can - someone I can afford. You know, like a couple hundred dollars a week, maybe even less, maybe someone who's like \$50 a week.

Mr. LeBOV: You know, you're going to have a hard time.

UNGER: LeBov is thinking of taking his Lobbying 101 to other states. He believes that there are vital lessons to be learned, as demonstrated in this most LeBovian question.

Mr. LeBOV: Lobbying is like war. Occasionally, you may need to represent or even lie. True or false?

UNGER: Oh, true. I mean it isn't a question of how much?

Mr. LeBOV: It's vital to tell the truth because your reputation is one of the very most important things that you have in terms of your ability to succeed as a lobbyist. The way I present it in the class is tell the truth, it's easier to remember.

UNGER: And that is today's Unger Report. I'm Brian Unger.

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