

BUSINESS COURIER

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Don't just register voters, create an 'allegiance'

Education can help explain business goals

Recent news stories about large U.S. corporations launching voter registration drives for their employees may have left the impression this will help Republicans at the ballot box. It might, if the corporations do this the right way.

But it could also backfire and simply result in a new crop of registered voters who may not have the company's best interests at heart.

The *Washington Post* and other media outlets reported that a growing number of corporations, including Exxon Mobil and DaimlerChrysler, are making it easy for workers to download voter-registration forms and apply for absentee ballots. Companies and trade associations galore also are directing employees to Web sites that show how candidates for federal office have voted on issues that affect the company.

I laud the companies that are conducting employee voter registration efforts. However, their one-dimensional efforts won't get the job done. They need to have an ongoing civic education program that creates an emotional allegiance to company issues. They have to take the time to teach employees about the political process and the industry issues that affect them.

I am thrilled that more businesses are interested in engaging in the political process. However, having earned my grass-roots stripes in an organization that has been doing this since 1978, I see some flaws in the assumption that voter registration equals voting for Republicans.

I agree with Lee Culpepper, senior vice

president of government affairs at the National Restaurant Association who told the *Washington Post*, "Everyone likes to say that they have a voter registration program, but you aren't necessarily moving the needle."

Creating an emotional allegiance to your issues so that employees know who to vote for without being told who to vote for is an entirely different and long-term endeavor. Companies that think that because they make it easy for employees to register to vote, their employees will automatically vote for candidates who support the corporation's goals are fooling themselves.

I directed the efforts of employee volunteers to register their colleagues to vote for nine years as manager of a Fortune 500 corporate employee grass-roots program. In that time, our nonpartisan voter registration efforts resulted in more than 10,000 new voters.

We know that when they voted, they took into consideration a candidate's position on issues of concern to that company because we asked them. More than 70 percent of the members of the employee grass-roots program said they took the candidate's position on our issues into account when they entered the voting booth. Why?

Because we created a culture of civic engagement that encouraged employees to contact their elected officials on issues that affected the industry and their paychecks. It was an ingrained part of the company culture. The employee grass-roots program began in 1978. Voter registration was simply one of many company-endorsed activities we offered to increase their civic engagement.

Companies that use voter registration as the only civic activity engagement opportunity will not get the results they want. There is a difference between a sustained program of employee engagement in civic and legislative issues and an election-year event.

It would be useful to survey the

employees of corporations that have enthusiastically embraced voter registration to find out how many actually considered a candidate's position on their company's issues when casting their vote.

Many corporations have grassroots networks. They may have a database of names. They may conduct ad hoc grass-roots campaigns where the CEO sends e-mail to all employees asking them to contact their legislator.

They may have an annual legislative reception, but they do not have a grass-roots or civic engagement culture.

You need a civic engagement culture if you are going to motivate your employees to call and write letters to elected officials. Getting them to register to vote is just the first step.

Ask an employee of an HMO or health care company if he will always vote the company's interests. If an industry faces legislative issues that are controversial and emotional, I'm sure that employee will not automatically vote in his company's interest. The company has to earn its employees' allegiance. It takes time and a culture of civic engagement, issue awareness and grass-roots action.

Showalter owns The Showalter Group Inc., which advises companies, trade associations and nonprofit organizations on how to develop effective grass-roots and PAC programs. It is based in Cincinnati.

VIEWPOINT

AMY
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(EMPLOYEES)
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