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Thinking Big, Starting Small

Perennial Group: Breaking the Mold

BY ANDY METZGER

In the “how to start your own lobby shop” story, there are few variations on the formula: A lobbyist leaves a big firm with a hefty book of business. A key Hill or agency staffer finds a partner and opens a small shop. But a Washington outsider with no experience in government and who never has lobbied a day in his life isn’t supposed to open up shop.

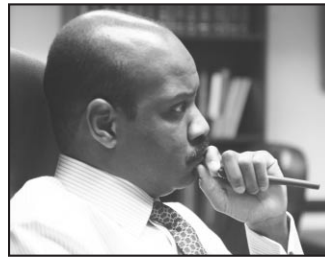
Lamell McMorris insists he doesn’t follow scripts. McMorris, 31, started the Perennial Strategy Group in 2002, after a stint as executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. With no experience in Washington, save for a few months as a fellow in the office of Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.), McMorris decided that lobbying provided “a great opportunity for an entrepreneur.”

It was an unorthodox decision. What followed was an unorthodox firm. The staff is decidedly unwonkish and business-centric. Roughly half the firm’s business is consulting work, and the lobbying work is almost always appropriations or targeted at federal agencies.

“What differentiates us,” says lobbyist Don Rosacker, “is not advocacy or an issue on the Hill. It’s how do we help our clients drive revenue?”

The firm’s small client list boasts big names: Hewlett-Packard, the energy provider Southern Co., and restaurant chain Buca di Beppo. But the fees it collects are relatively small—\$523,000 in 2004, according to Lobbying Disclosure Act filings. “We’ll beat [the big firms] on price,” says attorney Brian Lam. In 2004, Perennial’s lobby clients paid an average of about \$47,500 per year, according to lobbying disclosure filings.

Few of the lobbyists at Perennial fit the mold of traditional K Street creatures. Of the firm’s three lobbyists, only one—Vice President of Government Relations Robert Moran—was a lobbyist before joining. A. Matthew Bunker spent two years in the office of Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), and Rosacker headed a biotech company. “You have to look at what [competing small firms] offer,”



ENTREPRENEURIAL: Lamell McMorris (above) started Perennial Strategy Group in 2002. Don Rosacker joined two years ago.



PHOTOS BY ROBERTO WESTBROOK

Moran says. “Is it six people off the Hill? Does someone have a business background? Does this help you go back to your board of directors with something that’s positive and real?”

Moran, who joined in February, was considering jobs at trade associations and other small firms before he jumped to Perennial. He says the money wasn’t spectacular, but the outside-the-box environment was alluring. “Did I get the deal that everyone would jump at? No, but I got the deal that made me comfortable.”

Staffing has been a challenge for Perennial. Save for Rosacker, who has been with the firm two years, Perennial lobbyists are relatively new. A fourth lobbyist will be joining the firm at the end of the month. McMorris didn’t hire his first lobbyist until a year after opening shop.

Some clients say McMorris has done well so far. Darya Fields, who handles minority outreach for the Southern Co., says Perennial has already helped the energy company build relationships with the Congressional Black Caucus and the Urban League. Southern has its own D.C. office and employs more than a dozen lobby shops, but Fields says that no others could match Perennial’s access to minority groups. “Part of what was appealing is that there wasn’t a ready-made package. We said, ‘I know this is outside of lobbying, but can you help me?’” ■