

**INSIDER INSIGHTS**

What Corporate Communications Can Learn From Government Affairs

The attention economy rewards the fastest jab. As government's impact on business grows, corporate communications can learn from government affairs why this is a trap and how to turn opponents into allies when the right opportunities arise.

CONTRIBUTORS

Andrew Moyer
EVP & GM, Reputation Partners



Jeff Berkowitz
Co-Founder and CEO, Delve



Justin Joffe
Corporate Communications
Consultant

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communications can learn the long game from the office down the hall

Corporate communications works in an attention economy, where audiences are overloaded and every gain is hard-won: a little more visibility, a little more trust. That environmental pressure is compounded by a culture that gifts attention to anyone willing to poke the other side in the eye. The best communicators build processes to prevent the worst parts of this culture from turning opportunity into unforced brand errors. For a model of long-term thinking, communicators don't need to look farther than down the hall. Their government affairs colleagues already have these systems in place and understand that alliances can shift unexpectedly, often in your favor, with careful attention to events.

The pharmaceutical industry shows how this works. For years, President Trump attacked drugmakers over prices, and the industry pushed back at the expense of some public trust and the potential of lost revenue from the federal government. Since last year, more than two dozen pharmaceutical companies, including all 17 Trump had publicly pressured, have mended fences with him,¹ trading lower Medicaid drug prices for three years of tariff relief, because government affairs understood that years of stakeholder frustration was culminating in concrete action that the industry could fight or shape.²

In our first Insider Insights report, we argued that government affairs needs corporate communications as a full partner, not a late addition. This report makes the reverse case: It's communications' turn to learn from government affairs. "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual," Lord Palmerston told Parliament in 1848 — the line government affairs has built its discipline around ever since. That means mapping stakeholders by their interests rather than their current stance; giving even hostile offices a reason to keep talking; and making sure everyone who speaks for the company, from the boardroom to the brand account, knows what's at stake.

YOUR COMMUNICATIONS TEAM ISN'T THE ONLY ONE SPEAKING FOR THE COMPANY

Warren Buffett famously said that it takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. And everyone who speaks for a company — not just its communications team, but also executives, board members, junior staff running brand accounts, and thousands of employees on personal social media — can make the worst use of those five minutes. Compounding the risk is social media's reward structure for the opposite of restraint: A study of nearly 2.7 million posts found that each reference to the political opposition increased by 67 percent the odds of a post being shared.³

¹ "Trump Administration Adds Nine Drugmakers to Most-Favored-Nation Program," PharmExec, August 31, 2026.

² "Nine more companies sign US most-favored nation pricing deals," Becaris Publishing, December 2025.

³ Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, "Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media," PNAS, June 2021.

THE PROBLEM

Three ways the wrong voice gets loud

THE LEADER WITH A MICROPHONE

Netflix discovered the hard way that leaders with a microphone can hurt twice. When it offered \$82.7 billion to buy Warner Bros. Discovery's studios and streaming business, it had a beloved brand and hundreds of millions of paying subscribers. None of that stopped opposition from both parties: Sen. Elizabeth Warren called the deal an "anti-monopoly nightmare" and warned that it would give one company control of close to half the streaming market.⁴ Republicans raised antitrust concerns as well, and 11 Republican state attorneys general urged the Justice Department to investigate.⁵

Those are government leaders with huge microphones. In February 2026, with the deal under Justice Department review, a company spokesperson's microphone caused more damage. Netflix board member and former Obama administration consigliere Susan Rice predicted on a podcast that Democrats would pursue an accountability agenda against corporations that had accommodated the Trump administration. President Trump responded by demanding that Netflix fire her or face consequences, a threat widely read as aimed at the deal.⁶

Netflix ultimately walked away after Paramount Skydance outbid it, citing price. But it's hard to imagine that the widespread opposition from

leaders with microphones — as well as Rice's poor use of the microphone — didn't matter in the end.

THE STAFFER CHASING ENGAGEMENT

Brand accounts are often run by junior staff measured on engagement, and the platforms teach them what earns it. In March 2021, after Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI) criticized Amazon's working conditions, the company's official news account replied by mocking reports that workers had to urinate in bottles. Within days, Amazon issued a public apology to the congressman, calling the reply an "own-goal," saying it had not received proper scrutiny, and acknowledging that delivery drivers do sometimes have trouble finding restrooms.⁷ One snarky reply to a sitting member of Congress turned a critic's talking point into a corporate admission, in the middle of the biggest union push in Amazon's history.

THE EMPLOYEE WITH AN AGENDA

Most employees who act on personal convictions do it with a social media post. A few go much further. In 2020, Chris Smalls accused Amazon of employee abuse and neglect. He eventually became the leader of the first Amazon union to win in front of the National Labor Relations Board. Amazon fought the unionization at the single location but lost in 2022 despite what it claimed was positive relations with employees. Amazon went so far as to say that the NLRB was inappropriately involved in the unionization effort.⁸

⁴ "Netflix-Warner Bros. Deal Is an 'Anti-Monopoly Nightmare,' Sen. Warren Says," *Variety*, December 2025.

⁵ "Elizabeth Warren Questions What Trump White House Told Netflix Before Paramount's WBD Merger Victory," *TheWrap*, February 2026.

⁶ "Donald Trump Demands Netflix 'Immediately Fire' Board Member Susan Rice," *Variety*, February 2026.

⁷ "Amazon Apologizes to Congressman for Bogus 'Peeing' Tweet," *Associated Press*, April 3, 2021.

⁸ "Amazon NYC Warehouse Workers Support Union in Historic Labor Win," *Bloomberg Law*, April 1, 2022.

CASE STUDY

Ford: Reading the room when everyone was the enemy

In late 2008, the CEOs of GM, Chrysler, and Ford flew to Washington to ask Congress for help.

There was zero sympathy in the room, especially when corporate jet-riders were asking for Main Street's bailout on the heels of the financial industry's \$700 billion bailout. Lawmakers treated auto executives as symbols of corporate greed. When a congressman asked whether each would work for \$1 a year, Chrysler's Bob Nardelli said yes, GM's Rick Wagoner hedged, and Ford's Alan Mulally said he thought he was okay where he was.⁹ Scott Monty, Ford's digital director at the time, has since said the answer gave the entire communications team a heart attack.¹⁰ But Mulally had the last laugh.

Ford's leaders understood that the fight wasn't with GM and Chrysler. Mulally testified in favor of his rivals' rescue, arguing that their collapse would take down enough shared suppliers to threaten Ford and tens of thousands of American workers.¹¹ Treating everyone's survival as Ford's own interest positioned the company as a constructive player. The lesson in practice: Ford's leaders mapped GM and Chrysler by shared interest rather than by their standing as rivals.

The company never took a congressional bailout, which garnered significant headlines and praise. What was in the public square but downplayed by Ford was that Ford also needed help. Its credit arm used the Federal Reserve's Commercial Paper

Funding Facility, borrowing about \$7 billion during the crisis.¹² The facility was open to a wide range of companies, including Toyota, BMW, GE, and McDonald's, and it came without congressional hearings or headlines at the time.¹³ By the time the public picked up on the news, anger had faded, because corporate communications had spent two years making Ford the Detroit automaker that didn't need a taxpayer bailout while government affairs secured the funds it did need.

THE LINE THAT ALMOST BECAME THE STORY

When a congressman asked each CEO whether he'd work for \$1 a year, Alan Mulally didn't play along — and Ford's communications team braced for the headline. Scott Monty, Ford's digital director at the time, later said the answer gave the whole team a heart attack.¹⁰ It became a footnote instead of a crisis because everything else Ford did in that hearing room, defending its rivals and declining the bailout, gave reporters a bigger, better story to tell.

What's especially notable is that Ford generated two positive media outcomes. First were multiple media cycles proclaiming that it didn't need a bailout and that it wanted to help its competitors. Second was minimal media coverage about the money it did secure from other government-affiliated sources, protecting its prior public brand positioning.

⁹ "The Big Three's PR Disaster," Columbia Journalism Review, November 20, 2008.

¹⁰ Scott Monty, Ford's Global Digital and Multimedia Communications Manager at the time, in conversation with the authors, 2026.

¹¹ "Ford CEO Alan Mulally," CNNMoney, March 7, 2012.

¹² "Blue Ops: The Clandestine Bailout Of Ford," The Truth About Cars, December 2010 (citing Bloomberg).

¹³ "Ford, BMW, Toyota Took Secret Government Money," Jalopnik, December 2010.

THE SOLUTION

Make government affairs' long view a company-wide habit

Government affairs teams already think in years, map allies by interest, and know which relationships a single post could burn. The problem is that this discipline usually stays inside government affairs. The solution is to make it part of how the whole company speaks, with communications and government affairs building the system together.

1 THE GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS MAP

Communications and government affairs both build maps, and their combined maps should include environment, dynamics, and implications. For example, the environment of bipartisan concerns of corporate power led to Meta's painful lesson about its Instagram and WhatsApp purchases. The Federal Trade Commission approved the purchases during a time of relatively light oversight, but almost a decade later, the environment of concerns about tech's corporate power combined with dynamics of both parties wanting to be seen as protecting the public from social media companies' abuses created a massive new risk. The FTC pursued the case across three administrations before a federal judge ruled for Meta in November 2025.¹⁴ Billions of users did not prevent five years of litigation. Communications should have government affairs' map alongside its own and consult both before anything goes public. If a planned statement would burn a relationship on the map, that cost belongs in the decision-making process.

2 GIVE EVEN HOSTILE OFFICES A REASON TO KEEP TALKING

Government affairs keeps channels open with critics by creating incentives to stay at the table. Communications can supply one of the most powerful: credit. When a policy outcome goes the right way, officials want their constituents, their colleagues, and the press to know they delivered. Communications can build that content in advance, from press releases and op-eds that recognize an official's role to employee newsletters, site visits, and local stories that show the results in a member's district. When Pfizer announced its drug pricing deal, it did so in the Oval Office, alongside the president who had spent years attacking the industry — and the press widely reported on the deals using the president's language as well as Pfizer's that this was a win for consumers.¹⁵ Pfizer also avoided being seen as partisan because the issue at hand was drug pricing, something that is unpopular regardless of party. Officials who know that a company will share the win with cross-partisan stakeholders have every reason to take its next call, even after a hard fight.

3 BRIEF PUBLIC VOICES ON WHAT'S PENDING

Executives and board members speak publicly far more than they used to, on podcasts, panels, and social media. Before they do, they should know what the company has pending before government: a merger under review, a contract up for renewal, a rule in comment period. A five-minute briefing from government affairs would not have changed Susan Rice's views. It might have changed whether she shared them while Netflix had a deal before the Justice Department.

¹⁴ "Meta prevails in historic FTC antitrust case, won't have to break off WhatsApp, Instagram," Associated Press, November 18, 2025.

¹⁵ "Pfizer agrees to lower prescription drug costs for Medicaid in a deal with Trump," Associated Press, September 30, 2025.

4 BUILD A PAUSE INTO THE BRAND ACCOUNT

Any post that names an elected official, regulator, or agency should go through a quick government affairs review. Amazon's own explanation for its reply to Rep. Pocan was that the tweet had not received proper scrutiny. A simple escalation rule provides it, and it gives staff a clear answer to the question they are least equipped to judge alone: Is this fight worth having, and are we risking alienating the rest of the political world?

5 PARTNER WITH HR TO TEACH EVERY EMPLOYEE WHO THE CUSTOMER IS

For companies that sell to government, every employee is part of the customer relationship, whether or not they work on the account. Government affairs knows what's at stake with agencies that have long memories. Communications knows how to explain it. HR owns the moments when employees actually learn the rules, from onboarding to annual conduct training to social media policy. Together, the three can make the stakes concrete instead of abstract.

Amazon learned this lesson from the inside: Internal notes about how to respond to a fired warehouse organizer became public record, turning a single employee into the face of a union movement the company spent two years fighting and ultimately lost. No training stops every employee from becoming an unplanned spokesperson, but governance from the most impactful members of the leadership team will reduce how often that moment turns into the story.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Know when to say nothing, and know whom you'll need next

The attention economy will keep rewarding jabs, and the people who speak for a company, officially and unofficially, will be tempted to take their eyes off the bigger picture. Communications leaders can learn two things from government affairs: why to resist and how.

Government affairs has spent decades learning that today's opponent may be tomorrow's ally, that the quiet channel often works better than the loud one, and that sometimes the best response is none

at all. Our first report argued that government affairs needs communications at the table. This one argues the reverse, and the two lessons meet in the same place: Know when to say nothing, and know whom you'll need next.

Companies that make that discipline a habit will understand that it's most important to win only the news cycles that matter. And just like Ford, they'll see opportunities when a competitor's self-inflicted wound opens the door to new ones. ■



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