

VICKI ISEMAN'S LOBBYING CAREER

I don't mean to pick on Vicki Iseman. I just got rather fascinated by the career of this woman who—at least in 1999, when John McCain was running for President—openly boasted of her ties to McCain, the Chair of the Senate Commerce Committee (in fact, this story started from a "second-hand report from a lobbyist"). Some of her clients seem to back up that boast. Given the prevalence of media, and more recently, defense/VA contractors, in her portfolio, I imagine such boasts helped her career.

What follows relies primarily on the data available in the Senate Lobbyist Database—which only goes back to 1999. I can't tell you what happened in the (presumably) 9 years between the time she walked into her boss' office (I'm guessing this is Hector Alcalde) asking for a chance...

[I] walked into my boss's office [the president of the company] and said, 'You don't really know me, but I answer the phones. I'm a college graduate and I'd like you to consider me for a secretarial or an administrative position.'" He agreed to try her out for three months. Within a year she became his special assistant.

... And when, in 1999, she was a partner piling up relationships with media companies.

It appears that her big breaks happened in 1998, when clients like Paxson and Sinclair first started working with her. Though it wasn't until later 1999 that she became the lead on the Paxson account (the first lobbying report for Paxson in 1999 still lists Alcalde as the lead).

By 1999, she was the lead on accounts with a number of media companies—Paxson, Sinclair, and CanWest, which I've posted about, as well as

AMFM Inc and Capstar (which would get absorbed into Clear Channel with her help) and Telemundo (which would get bought by NBC with her help) and Hispanic Broadcasting (which then had ties to Clear Channel, and which would get absorbed into Univision in 2003 with her help). So in 1999, when Vicki Iseman was trading on McCain's name as he ran for President, seven of her eight major clients involved consolidating media conservative media properties.

The exception is Computer Sciences Corp—which I'm going to have to come back to, for a variety of reasons (but if you want to kibitz in the comments, please do).

In the time frame of McCain's first presidential run, she also seemed to help out on her colleagues' accounts—for the most part, they're the kind of earmark accounts that the firm focuses on. So she helped out lobbying for Marin County, Tulare County, Palm Springs. She also lobbied on larger accounts, like Carnival Cruise lines and Astra-Zeneca, both of which would have had interests before the Commerce Committee.

Her client base did not significantly expand beyond that, in recent years. The actual fees paid by the media companies increased as their issues acquired new urgency—as when her lobbying tied into a McCain attempt to help save Paxson and another Iseman client, Jovan Broadcasting (her only liberal media outlet client), from losing their frequencies.

After a brief period of Democratic dominance, McCain returned to become chairman of the committee in 2003 and 2004. During that period, he took crucial legislative action that saved Paxson Communications from a bill that would have, in the words of CEO Lowell "Bud" Paxson, financially ruined his company.

Even more ironically, McCain took this action for Paxson in spite of his long-standing position that television

broadcasters had inappropriately used the transition to digital television (DTV) to benefit themselves financially at the expense of the American public.

Or when Univision successfully acquired Hispanic Broadcasting in 2003 (I have a hunch we'll hear more about this)—creating overwhelming concentration in the Hispanic broadcast market and, when matched with the NBC acquisition of Telemundo, giving conservative corporations utter domination of Hispanic broadcasting. From a January-February 2004 NACLA report (behind a firewall):

In the fall of 2003, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the U.S. government's media regulation arm, approved Univision's merger with Hispanic Broadcasting Corp., the nation's largest owner of Spanish-language radio stations. For the entire summer, the FCC had been at the center of a storm of public criticism over its historic decision in June to loosen U.S. media ownership regulations. The changes, which are still being fought over in the U.S. Congress and the courts, favor large corporations and the concentration of media ownership through consolidation.

For critics, even some within the FCC, the approval of the Univision merger appeared to be more of the same. Jonathan S. Adelstein, a Democrat who is on the five-member FCC, said he believes the Univision merger was approved too hurriedly by a commission that seems unconcerned with preserving a variety of viewpoints and information sources in Spanish-language media. "I'm not saying I would have necessarily opposed that [merger], but we should have looked at how to preserve diversity."

What is certain is that the deal

catapulted Univision into the category of a bona-fide media giant. The company now owns 62 television stations, which broadcast either Univision or its sibling, the Telefutura network; these channels reach nearly all the Latino households in the country. There's also Galavision, the Spanish-language cable channel, which reaches 5.7 million Latino cable subscribers. With the merger, Univision can also now boast of 65 radio stations that it either owns or programs.

This was a very strategic acquisition because Univision also controls three record labels that it says capture 35% of the U.S. Latino music market. The company can now use its radio stations to promote its stable of music talent. Additionally, Univision owns the top Web site for U.S. Latinos, Univision.com, which gets over 1 billion hits a year. With all these properties in its portfolio, Univision raked in a reported \$100 million in net income during the first nine months of 2003. [paragraph breaks added for legibility]

Iseman also appears to have supported Total Life Networks' (which has ties to Paxson) attempts to combat a la carte cable pricing.

While cable television customers may applaud the notion of paying for only those channels they want, religious broadcasters say it will diminish their reach.

Pay-per-channel pricing "would have a devastating effect on the inspirational programming we currently provide" and "decimate both the audience and financial support for religious broadcasting," according to the Faith and Family Broadcasting Coalition.

The group includes Pat Robertson, founder of the Virginia Beach-based Christian Broadcasting Network, and Rev. Jerry Falwell, founder of Liberty University in Lynchburg and the defunct Moral Majority.

Last month, the Federal Communications Commission said customers could save as much as 13 percent on their cable bills with per-channel pricing because they no longer would have to buy packages that may include dozens of channels they do not want.

But many evangelical broadcasters, as well as much of the cable industry, dispute the savings and oppose per-channel pricing, or a la carte cable.

A large segment of religious networks' audience comes from viewers who discover religious programs while flipping through the channel lineup in their cable package, said Jerry Rose, president of the evangelical Total Living Network.

Rose predicted that viewers would buy only prominent channels, such as CNN or ESPN, and the specialty channels in which they have personal interest. Many viewers, "especially people who'd be considered nonreligious, they're just not going to click off on that Christian channel and pay for it," he said.

I'll be interested to see if McCain helped Iseman out here, since he's a noted supporter of a la carte pricing. Then again, he's a noted opponent of media concentration, too, but that didn't prevent him from helping Iseman's client, Sinclair, from evading laws on media ownership.

Starting in 2006, Iseman started doing more of the kind of work her firm normally did—acquiring earmarks for localities. In her case, she collected pork for her high school and college,

as well as a curious non-profit, Operation Warm.

A few years ago, Mrs. Smith said, Ms. Iseman contacted the district administrators, "saying she would like to help the district and discuss the possibility of helping Homer-Center obtain some of the federal dollars out there."

And she did acquire work with Sage Communications—working, as she is with some of her long-time clients—on issues relating to the move to digital broadcasting.

Which leaves just three more big clients. CSC, like I mentioned, has been a client since at least 1999.

In addition, from 2004 to the present, she lobbied for Bearing Point. formerly KPMG. Bearing Point's profile is closer to CSC's, and recently she's been lobbying on things like spectrum policy. But she seems to have gotten into the work when Bearing Point's VA financial-logistics contract started to go south.

And then there's her latest new client, CACI, who were some of the interrogators who got in trouble at Abu Ghraib. Iseman's contract post-dates that trouble and purportedly relates to Veterans Affairs. Perhaps this relates to CACI's efforts to hire disabled veterans for contract positions.

What is interesting, though, is with her Bearing Point, CACI, and CSC contracts, Iseman has shifted focus, from an almost exclusive focus on media consolidation, to one more focused on defense and VA contracting. Of course, former Commerce Chair John McCain moved to the Ranking Member on Armed Services Committee in 2006. But it may be that Iseman has developed contacts on Veterans Affairs totally unrelated to McCain. Let's hope it doesn't mean she's chummy with one of the Democrats on VA affairs, Barack Obama. Because she doesn't seem to help a man's presidential bid.

Updated: Fixed some syntax and added context to
a la carte cable debate.