

The Role of PACs in the Fight against Puppy Mills

The animal community understands that puppy mills have a devastating effect on overpopulation, homelessness, and unfathomable euthanasia rates, and we can agree that the existence of puppy mills is illogical and unethical. However, our message is often stifled by our inability to speak the language of politics. When we discuss animal issues and moral rightness with legislators, often times, it is as if we are speaking in an unfamiliar dialect among natives whose preferred idiom is money and influence. If our political system were fluent in the language of morals, we would win the argument every time. However, in a situation where we have morals and our opposition has money, we will continue to fall short. Our goal as a community should be to emerge as a viable contender in the war against puppy mills by understanding the political culture, following a consistent and unified strategy, and ensuring that we have the same tools as our opponents. If all else is even and we also have moral rightness on our side, then victory is inevitable.

The first thing to understand is that puppy mills represent big business with even bigger wallets. When most of us think about puppy mills, we envision backyard breeders with hundreds of dogs in cramped, filthy metal cages, but that is just the beginning of the process. In order to get these puppies to retailers, they use distributors - much larger corporations that take dogs from puppy mills, then transport, hold, and distribute them to pet stores, and in some cases to animal dealers and research facilities. These distributors have a great deal of money and influence.

To paint this picture, imagine that a legislator is scheduled to vote on a bill that would restrict distribution of a certain product and s/he receives a call from the largest distributor in the United States urging a "no" vote. The legislator is informed that the distributor sells over 80,000 items per year from a 30,000 square foot local warehouse (slightly smaller than your neighborhood Wal-Mart), has just under 300 employees, and reported over \$26 million in sales in 2001 alone. From the politician's perspective, the company employs individuals in the community, pays a significant amount of taxes, and is highly influential in its industry. Not to mention that the corporation has the financial backing to generate significant political influence through contributions via industry PACs and sponsorship of advertisements during the campaign season. These are the concerns of the average politician.

This is more than a hypothetical situation. The company described above is the Hunte Corporation, the biggest puppy distribution facility in the United States that supplies over 80,000 puppies per year to pet stores across the country, including the notorious PetLand. Now, imagine that the bill in

question is anti-puppy mill legislation. In contrast to the call from the distributor, when animal non-profits call urging a "yes" vote, the legislator sees that they are tax-exempt, largely based out-of-state or staffed primarily by volunteers, unable to make campaign contributions or endorsements, and restricted in the extent to which they can lobby.

Animal advocacy non-profits achieve legislative success largely through education and awareness campaigns via grassroots and marketing efforts. The goal is to inform the public about animal issues and to encourage individuals in the community to get involved by spreading awareness to others and by becoming "citizen lobbyists" who can make calls to their representatives urging them to vote for/against various bills. This process is necessary, as it is extremely important for politicians to please their constituents in order to be re-elected and properly represent the interests of their community. But, there is another factor involved - funding. Without money to run their campaigns, politicians are doomed to fail. This is where political action committees (PACs) enter the picture. PACs are the vehicle by which corporations (and individuals) are able to donate money to politicians. When PACs make contributions to candidates, they play the important role of defining who the contributors are and what issues they care about. For instance, when an agriculture-related PAC makes a donation, the candidate knows that s/he is supported by people who care about the agricultural industry (note: puppy mills are considered agricultural operations and are monitored by the USDA). When candidates receive contributions from K9 PAC, they understand that the people who support them care about dog welfare and protection. In contrast, when candidates receive direct contributions from individuals (outside of a PAC), they do not have the additional information necessary to understand what issues matter to the contributors. While the money goes to the politician of your choice, it fails to convey why you are supporting them - a message that is made clear through PACs.

The animal advocacy community is rich in 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations, but lacks a presence in the influential world of PACs. Meanwhile, our opponents have numerous PACs that have been swinging their substantial influence around for years. We created K9 PAC to help establish a unified voice for our cause by adding financial backing and political influence to the tremendous work of existing non-profits. Non-profits and PACs differ in their abilities and limitations under the law, so we must come together and form a cohesive unit that allows us to compete. Through collaboration between non-profits and PACs, we can create a unified front that represents both constituents and contributors, along with the competitive advantage of moral rightness. Now, THAT, is a recipe for victory.