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A conversation with Sam Simon

This grass-roots strategist, who once championed for the little guy alongside Ralph Nader, now works in the very messy middle — helping big corporations and consumers speak the same language



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When Ralph Nader started to take on America's corporate powers, Sam Simon was right there. When the NAACP wanted to be heard, it went to Simon. When the telephone industry and teachers tangled, Simon took the call and found a compromise.

A veteran of many heated battles, Simon enters the fray with cool composure and a steely reserve — the combination of traits every negotiator needs. And one that's served him well in grass-roots politics and corporate showdowns.

In 1970, Simon became one of Nader's Raiders, lawyers who led the charge against what they perceived as the abuses of large corporations. Simon became familiar with corporate culture and politics and developed tactics for negotiating with companies.

He still uses the knowledge gained during those years, but not just to satisfy consumer-interest groups. Now he looks for ways advocacy groups and businesses can work together on issues.

As the president of Issue Dynamics, a D.C.-based public affairs and Internet-strategy firm, Simon works on behalf of big companies to establish business practices that meet the needs of nonprofits and interest groups.

Some critics have claimed that Simon can't serve two masters, the consumer and the company. But he counters, "We're building bridges," a job that clearly can't be done from just one side.

Was there a specific event that prompted you to become a consumer advocate?

When I was about 14, I became outraged that the city of El Paso had imposed an 11 p.m. curfew on kids 17 and younger. It was clear to me that this was designed to discriminatorily apply to the Hispanic kids. So this 14-year-old kid did his research and went to the City Council, without permission from my parents. I still remember when the mayor looked out and asked if there was anyone who's got something to say. I raised my hand and gave a talk on why this was unconstitutional. [Nelson] Rockefeller was one of my sources. Something in my blood, from the time I was a kid, caused me to advocate or get involved with advocacy. When the local newspaper called and asked what was next, I said, "a petition to repeal the curfew."

What lessons did you learn from your time with Nader?

The most important thing, and he still has it, is to trust your own sense of justice. It's become a personal calling. When we started out in 1970, a lot of our colleagues were out on the street, as radicals. But we were going to change the world by working within the system. To do that meant

studying, researching, arguing from fact. What impressed me as a young lawyer was that you can pursue your ideals, that any individual can make a difference. There are a lot of people who complain and gripe, but I've always thought that anybody can change the world.

What are some projects that IDI is working on?

One project is working with the disability community and the telecommunications industry to come up some new legislation that everybody can support. There are a lot of [people] who will go to big corporations and say, "There are these consumer groups ... let's crush them." What we say is: "There are these consumer groups. Let's

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Texas Western College (renamed the University of Texas at El Paso), bachelor's degree; University of Texas School of Law

HOBBIES: Acting in local theater groups such as Downtown Serenity Players and Stars Improv Group.

BEST DINING IN D.C.: "For lunch McCormick & Schmick's, and the Mayflower Promenade for breakfast. I eat there almost everyday and order the same thing. I'm a creature of habit."

talk about the issues and how to understand them.”

What’s your response to criticism that you can’t be on both sides of the fence?

The existence of critics means we’re doing our job. We’ve had trouble. Among my projects, I’m chairman of the National Consumers League. After that had been announced, someone said to me, “We didn’t use to let people like you in the building.” Some of the clients aren’t comfortable, either. My view is that we have been doing what the American public really wants, and it’s been highlighted in the post-Katrina era. We don’t think you should be ideologically driven. Really you should look for solutions. There’s a perfect role for advocates who take one perspective. I respect and love Ralph Nader, and it’s great that he’s out there. But there’s an important role for us to bring perspectives together. The answer to critics is that we do this because there is room in the middle. That’s where progress happens.

Has there been a client that you disagreed with ideologically?

I haven’t worked with anyone that I’ve felt uncomfortable around. We wouldn’t

work for the tobacco industry, not for the National Rifle Association. We’ve been careful in the energy area, concerning nuclear energy issues. ... Not every project is food for the soul. We’ve had to do very mundane things. It’s a day-to-day thing, not an ideological thing.

Any projects that stand out as major accomplishments?

When Congress passed a tele-communications act, they put a provision on it to allow schools and libraries to get products at a discount. The phone companies were unhappy; the education groups we were working with thought the phone companies were double-dealing. We spent nearly a year having meetings. I’d get calls saying, “Why are we having these meetings. We’re just wasting our money.” On a Thursday night, I got a call from an executive at Bell Atlantic, saying he has an idea, but we can’t do it unless the education groups approve. We sat everyone down to meet at the table the next day. They all sat, silent with their arms crossed, and I said, “OK, somebody has got to say something. You’ve heard what they want, and he’s got an idea.” One of the educational group people asked a question and that was all it took. We wrote it up, got two senators and a

congressman to bless it, and then the FCC approved it on Tuesday.

Why has Issue Dynamics embraced blogging ?

Blogging is really another facet of reaching out to people. One of our first clients was the United Church of Christ. We launched an Internet campaign for them, with a video produced by the church that was deemed too controversial for network television. We raised money for them by applying blogging technology.

What’s next for grass-roots organizations?

In the future of grass roots and advocacy, blogging and the Internet are tools. In the most sophisticated way, you can establish a relationship with a large number of people. The challenge is that technology allows you to do anything. People who are targeted have to figure what’s real, what’s serious. We’ve never been fans of big e-mail campaigns. You have to keep using technology to show you really care and empower people to get more involved in the political process.

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