

The political campaign industry. (Joe Napolitan, Matt Reese, Brad O'Leary, and Tom Edmonds talk about the ups and downs, the highs and lows, of being political consultants) (Interview)

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Joe Napolitan, Matt Reese, Brad O'Leary, and Tom Edmonds Talk About the Ups and Downs, the Highs and Lows, of Being Political Consultants

In honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the American Association of Political Consultants, Campaigns and Elections magazine gathered together its current president and three former presidents. They exchanged reminiscences and talked insightfully about the present, past, and future of their association and industry.

Joseph Napolitan is president of Joseph Napolitan Associates, Inc., a Democratic general consulting firm with offices in Springfield, Massachusetts and New York. He is a founder and past president of both the American Association of Political Consultants and the International Association of Political Consultants. Napolitan worked on Hubert Humphrey's 1968 presidential campaign and Venezuelan presidential campaigns.

Matthew A. Reese is a pioneer in the political consulting business, both in the United States and abroad. He is a principal in the McLean, Virginia-based Democratic consulting firm, Reese & Associates. Reese coordinated President John F. Kennedy's West Virginia primary and was a deputy chair of the Democratic National Committee.

Bradley O'Leary heads PM Consulting Group, a Washington, DC, Republican fundraising and political consulting firm. He co-hosts a radio talk show and publishes the O'Leary/Kamber Report. He has worked for Senators Phil Gramm and Bob Dole, among others.

Thomas N. Edmonds, the current president of the AAPC, is the president of Edmonds Associates, a Republican media firm based in Washington, DC. He has done extensive PAC work for such groups as the Fund for a Conservative Majority and the National Rifle Association, and he produces political documentaries.

The interview was conducted by Campaigns & Elections editor Ron Faucheux and managing editor Andrea Spring. Photographs were taken by Barry Baron.

How do you think the political industry has changed in the last 25 years?

NAPOLITAN: The big changes have been in technology. The strategies have not changed that much. We have a little more attack advertising than we had 25 years ago. Computers and fax machines have been the best additions.

O'LEARY: Technology and the decrease in volunteers. Technology can do things faster than volunteers can. The other big change is that the American electorate is smarter than it was. We may beat up on special interest groups, but they have done an incredible job of making people aware of the issues.

REESE: The most stunning thing is the technology, especially targeting media and one-on-one voter contact. The sophistication level has jumped enormously.

EDMONDS: The biggest change is in the candidates. I think we have a new breed of candidates out there. They have come up knowing they wanted to run for public office, and that has become their profession. Some of the best talent has gotten scared off; a lot of what you now have is they second tier. In by-gone days, most candidates worked their way up through the system. Today, somebody can just decide to run for the United States Senate and run. These people can harness the technology and win without having paid their dues.

O'LEARY: I'm not sure I agree with that. The old breed of candidates had lots of problems.

REESE: It goes back to the death of the party. When I worked for Kennedy in North Carolina in 1960, my job was to get the state party to support Kennedy. We had a few mailings, but it was not an independent campaign; it was part of the effort to win for the Democratic Party.

NAPOLITAN: Television provided the medium where candidates could communicate directly to the voters without filtering their message through a news editor, copy editor or headline writer.

REESE: Or a party leader.

EDMONDS: But that also brought about campaigns that lack substance in terms of issues; most modern candidates are more interested in soundbites than they are in position papers. They are more interested in how to manipulate the message than what the message really is.

REESE: There is a superficiality about American politics, candidates, consultants and parties. It goes back to the fact that voters are very bright, but they are not very interested. So they like the ball game. They like the attacks. They like all that, yet they're disgusted with the lack of substance. But they don't really pay attention enough to understand, at least to my satisfaction, the differences.

Do you think the modern electoral process is serving the original goals of the democratic system?

EDMONDS: You look at low voter turnout, and a lot of people think it is a sign of weakness. I think it is a sign that the system is working. Some people don't participate because they have relegated that responsibility to somebody else. They feel like they can focus on other things in their lives rather than the political process.

REESE: As bad as the American political process is, it is marvelous. We accept in a democratic fashion some of the master assholes of the world and we tolerate them for four years. We don't go to the streets to remove them. Democracy is flourishing. It is safe at this moment, and it is a marvelous thing.

O'LEARY: We have a fairer system than we had 25 years ago. There is less fraud. There is less ability for the candidates to fool the public. A lot of those people who are not voting are really saying "I'm happy with the way things are, and there is nothing that upsets me." So as long as there are people still turning out, and we get candidates on both sides of the issue, we won't have a dictatorship. We have the best system in the world.

NAPOLITAN: The percentage of voter turnout is not an indication of the success of the system. I remember several years ago when Hungary declared its independence, they had 90 percent turnout. A couple of years later, they were having 35 to 40 percent turnouts. The novelty had worn off. I would rather see an election in this country where you get a 50 to 60 percent turnout of people who know what the issues are than let the election be decided by the 90 percent who pay absolutely no attention.

EDMONDS: That may sound elitist, but I agree with you. I disagree with the moaning and groaning because somebody who is sleeping on a park bench is not voting and canceling out your vote that you thought through. It is fine the way it is. I don't think you should be providing tax credits and incentives to encourage people to do what they should do on their own.

O'LEARY: It is not only dumb but almost corrupt to pay people to come out to the polls to vote. That was the way it was in the old days.

EDMONDS: But we are moving towards that with mail votes and motor voter.

NAPOLITAN: In Venezuela, they have a little different twist. They penalize you for not voting by lifting your passport.

O'LEARY: How many coups have they had?

NAPOLITAN: Voter turnout has been higher in Venezuela than it has been here, but this year will probably be one of the lowest turnouts they have ever had. There have been a couple of attempted coups, but none has succeeded.

Do you think the campaign finance reforms, particularly contribution limits, that were passed in the mid '70s by Congress and subsequently by states have served the system well?

O'LEARY: The law that was originally passed where you had to make public how much you were giving and who you were giving it to was a great law. Because of that law, a lot of people who got prison terms for trying to get illegal money into campaigns. Those were probably the harshest penalties that were ever handed out. But, limiting campaign contributions is limiting participation. There is nothing wrong with money in the system as long as the public knows where it is coming from.

NAPOLITAN: Absolutely

O'LEARY: The American Revolution would have failed if there had been a limit on what people could have given George Washington to carry out that revolution. Political revolutions in this country are just as important as the revolution 200 years ago. Political revolutions should not be limited by regulations that say people cannot participate.

EDMONDS: Money in campaigns equates to communication. Even the Supreme Court said that. The average senate race last year cost \$4 million dollars. The average senator represented 5 million people, and he only gets elected once every six years. That's 12 cents per voter per year. I don't know anybody on Madison Avenue who could communicate anything for 12 cents per person per year.

O'LEARY: When we all started out in this business, we could go to several people and get enough money to get a campaign going. Today candidates have to go to thousands of people to get the money.

REESE: So what's wrong with government funding of campaigns?

EDMONDS: I don't want my money going to Jesse Jackson or Jesse Helms.

O'LEARY: Or Lenora Fulani.

EDMONDS: Or David Duke. When I open up my wallet, I want to give money to the candidate who best represents my point of view.

REESE: I know there are difficulties there. But the cost of public financing is not so significant as compared to the special interest influence you're stopping.

O'LEARY: Public financing of presidential campaigns is the biggest sham that has ever been perpetrated on the American people.

EDMONDS: Imagine being lobbied by the IRS on the front of your income tax form to do something that won't cost you anything. Eighty-one percent of taxpayers have said no to the one dollar checkoff to fund presidential campaigns. Public financing doesn't work. The public doesn't want it. So what is their answer? Raise the checkoff from one to three dollars.

NAPOLITAN: Reforms have made the reporting of contributions more important, and there are now fewer hidden contributions.

REESE: I personally don't care if there are contribution limits or not. But I am opposed to limits on the amount of money that can be spent in a campaign. I am strongly in favor of everything being reported.

EDMONDS: The FEC should keep track of everything that goes in and everything that goes out of a campaign, but other than that I cannot think of much else that they should be doing.

O'LEARY: Bill Clinton would not have been elected president of the United States if he had to adhere to the limits. He helped create the Democratic Leadership Council as a means of getting corporate money to help him build a national network to run for president. I would much rather have a system where there were unlimited contributions, and we could tell where all the money was really coming from. They have created a system where they are hiding the money again.

REESE: The system is corrupted by the endless search for money and the compromises that come from it.

EDMONDS: So-called reforms have created all this gobbledygook where campaigns have to fight their way

through these loopholes. . .

REESE: I'm not defending that.

O'LEARY: The corruption in public financing is you don't have to come back to people and say, "This is what I believe, this is what I want the money for." The corruption is where the government gives you the money and you have no one you're accountable to.

EDMONDS: If a candidate can rely on 40 percent of his financing from PACs now, and say to hell with the people back in his district, what will happen when he has public financing and doesn't need to go back home at all.

O'LEARY: Let me tell you about a person who, to carry out his campaign, had to do 1800 individual fundraisers and sent out over 8000 letters. . .

REESE: Public financing would remove that.

O'LEARY: Do you know who that candidate was? George Washington.

REESE: I talked to Hubert Humphrey right before he got sick, and I said, "Senator, would you do it all again?" He said, "Not in a million years." I asked, "Why not?" He said, "The money. I wouldn't want to get involved in trying to raise the money again."

NAPOLITAN: It was hard.

REESE: I suspect Hubert Humphrey never broke a law in his life. But he didn't want to do what he had to do to raise the money to run for president.

O'LEARY: And Congress made the system tougher with the limits.

REESE: The problem is the cost and corruption of raising money in politics today.

EDMONDS: I don't think it's corrupt to allow the American public to voluntarily give money to the candidate they support and withhold it from those that they don't.

REESE: I don't either.

O'LEARY: If you take money out of the system and don't let candidates get it, you know what we're going to have? You're going to have 50 new independent expenditure committees forming in every state. They'll start ringing the bell of what happens in American politics. And there's nothing legally you could do to stop it because of First Amendment protections.

REESE: We're going to have that anyway.

O'LEARY: You can get rid of independent expenditures tomorrow by getting rid of the contribution caps.

Why hasn't the political consultant community, and in particular the AAPC, taken more of a leadership role on campaign finance reform issues?

EDMONDS: We have been very involved, but our members aren't of one mind. Some support public financing, some don't. Some think we have too much regulation, others want more. We don't have one cohesive position. We set up a bipartisan committee and have provided information to our members. Some things we can agree on, like what I call, "the devil in the details," some of the ridiculous mechanical things they put into campaign laws that truly hurts everybody. Congress should talk to the professionals in this business about the practical implications of the laws they pass.

O'LEARY: We're the only group that represents every person who's ever lost. |Laughter~

REESE: Some of us more than others. |Laughter~

O'LEARY: And no one's ever talked to us about what the losers want. The winners, the incumbents, are writing the laws.

What about ethics in the campaign industry. Do you think the AAPC should be setting standards? Do you

think there's a need for, as some have suggested, government control?

NAPOLITAN: I'd certainly be opposed to government control. And I don't know how you legislate morality. That's been the biggest problem that we've had to face. What one individual or group may consider ethical, another thinks is unethical. Who is to say? We hear talk about banning negative advertising. We can't even define negative advertising. The ethical level of political consultants as a group is higher than that of candidates as a group. We are in this business year in and year out, and if we get the reputation of being dirty campaigners, it's going to cost us. A candidate might have one crack at being a United States senator or governor and is willing to pull out all stops. A consultant might have two or five or fifteen campaigns going on simultaneously and has to go back year after year and live on his reputation.

But there's no enforcement mechanism to the AAPC's ethics code. Don't lawyers, doctors, and other professions have enforced ethics.

ALL: No, no they don't.

They can be disbarred, they can lose their license, can't they?

O'LEARY: That's right: they've got a licensing system, which is very expensive, which they pay for, and which they go to school for. You don't go to school to become a political consultant, nor do we have a licensing system for free speech in this country. It's a different thing you're talking about here.

REESE: In my experience, laws are being obeyed. Many years ago, when it was not against the law, I once or twice collected my fee behind the barn, late at night, in cash -- it wasn't illegal then, but it certainly wasn't terribly moral.

EDMONDS: Can you tell us more details?

REESE: No, I won't. |Laughter~

REESE: Probably a little exaggeration, but no consultant would do that now who cares about staying in the business. My problem is with the laws, not the obeying of them.

EDMONDS: There's a whole body of law that applies here. We cannot restrict trade; we cannot restrict the First Amendment: we cannot, as an organization, penalize those who choose not to be AAPC members. We've got to be very careful that we don't try to regulate who may practice in this profession and who may not.

O'LEARY: There isn't one of us here, who hasn't penalized someone for not following what we believe to be a code of ethics by talking to a candidate, getting that candidate not to hire a consultant. There were people in this business five years ago who aren't in this business today because there was an informal code of ethics brought down on their head.

REESE: The AAPC's code of ethics may not satisfy St. Peter, but there's a code beyond what's written down.

O'LEARY: And certainly we have a better code of ethics than the American Association of Advertising Agencies. Some of the sleaziest ads are produced by people in the commercial advertising business with no one coming down on their head.

What do you think is the future of "campaigns without candidates," like issues management and corporate public affairs campaigns. Do you think there's a new industry growing out of the political consulting industry?

NAPOLITAN: Yes, that's the future for the political consultant. Matt, you were a pioneer in taking the skills we've used in political campaigns and adapting them to the corporate world and the non-political world. That's a great field. We have developed certain skills and techniques that are adaptable to other situations besides political campaigns.

REESE: It works so well, because we are trained in crisis, we are trained in successfully using too little resources. When I got into corporate work, I found that you wouldn't hire most of their PR people to work on a campaign in Muncie. We're damned good in comparison.

O'LEARY: We're trained in speed, and we meet deadlines.

NAPOLITAN: Cliff White and I used to do a little dog-and-pony show. We were out in Denver, giving a session for some businessmen. They invited him and I guess they figured they needed me as a token Democrat. It really got embarrassing, the lack of knowledge that some of these corporate people had about government and politics. These were heads of big companies! I asked Cliff, "Are all businessmen this dumb?" He looked at me and said, "These are the smart ones."

|Laughter~

REESE: Non-candidate work is burgeoning. It's our biggest opportunity. I always told Martha, that if I had to die, I hoped it was on November the 15th in an even-numbered year, because there would be money in the bank. |Laughter~ I had a big shop, and I couldn't feed them year around without going into something else. And I found out it was easy to get in there. I bet a third of our membership are doing things like that.

EDMONDS: Yes, more.

O'LEARY: I think two-thirds.

REESE: Another factor is that there are more political consultants than in the old days, when our competition was the law partner who used to run the campaign.

NAPOLITAN: That hurdle's overcome. Now, nobody would run without at least one, or a team of consultants. With so many more consultants out in the field, what has almost disappeared are the national consultants. There's a lot more local names. You get a few big name firms. But most of the consulting now is on a regional basis.

EDMONDS: A large political consulting company is still a small company by commercial standards. That's the best part. It's one of the few areas where the American dream is still alive. If you have talent it makes no difference where you're from, where you went to school. It's what you can do that matters. You can pit your skills against the best in the business and you win or lose based on what you do, not who you are.

NAPOLITAN: And it ends

REESE: Thank God it ends.

EDMONDS: You're glad to see the screen flash: Game Over.

As the business has gotten more competitive and specialized, do you think it has gone from a talent business to a marketing business?

EDMONDS: It's still talent.

REESE: It always was marketing. Somebody asked me what I do best; I said "sell it." The first duty of a statesman is to get elected, and the first duty of a political consultant is to get hired. If you can't market yourself, how can you market a candidate?

O'LEARY: But you can't be a great marketer and have no product.

REESE: Most great marketers have a good product.

Do you see a generation gap in the political campaign business? What do you think of the younger people getting in?

NAPOLITAN: They're smarter, more sophisticated, but probably don't have any more talent. Their knowledge in certain fields certainly exceeds mine in many technical areas.

REESE: There's more specialization. But, too often now it's a supermarket approach. There's lots of campaigns where nobody is putting it all together.

O'LEARY: People now are a lot smarter in the technology. But they're not smarter on how to handle crises. You've got to learn how to handle disaster before you're an expert in handling disaster.

NAPOLITAN: Matt said something one time that is indelible in my mind -- there as this hotshot consultant

around who had won six or seven campaigns, hadn't lost any. I didn't know him, so I called Matt and asked him, do you know this guy? Matt said, "Yeah he's pretty good, but he'll be a lot better after he loses."

REESE: I have called Joe and he has called me about people we want to put into a campaign. If Joe says stay away from him, I stay away. You have to produce if you want to last.

What do you think is the future of American consultants working in other countries?

NAPOLITAN: There are a lot of Americans working in other countries right now. The hot place has been Latin America. Democracy is in its infancy there. Twenty years ago, there were five or six countries with Democratic governments, now it's over 20. Matt and I have been campaigns in Venezuela where you could have had a meeting of the AAPC on the patio of the Tamanaco Hotel. Most South American countries have direct elections for president and use television, which you can't do in some European countries. There are a few consultants who have worked in Europe. A lot of them said they worked in Eastern Europe and Russia, but I don't know how many of them got paid.

REESE: First duty of a consultant.

NAPOLITAN: Unless you want to walk home with a wheel barrow full of Zlotys, getting paid in our currency is pretty tough in those countries. A lot of people go over there for the excitement. There are opportunities for American consultants abroad. It is a different style and you have to be very patient. You have to change your mode of operation. Africa is going to open up. They'll have American consultants involved. There are opportunities in Asia, but we don't really have a lot of people familiar enough with Asian culture. I don't think Western Europe is a fertile field. They've got some very good people over there. Germany has institutes where they train party people. In Great Britain, they are nervous about us being involved.

REESE: International consulting is a real high. One day in Venezuela, I was looking out over the city, and I thought, what the hell am I doing here? I found out that they didn't know as much about campaigning as I had learned. So it's a high.

NAPOLITAN: In the 35 years I'd been in this business, the most exciting period was when I helped a guy who got elected president of France. I was hired for 22 months. Every month, I spent a week in Paris and I had lunch in the Elysee Palace with the president of France. Now that was a high!

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