

September 30, 1989

Bradley S. O'Leary

Adding a Little Order To Political Consulting

By Carol Matlack

A professional code of ethics for political consultants, the masterminds of the down and dirty 1988 campaigns? How about a charm school for pro hockey players?

Try that repartee on Bradley S. O'Leary, and you're likely to get a lecture. "There are more than 4,000 firms involved in this business," and last year only one of them was charged with fraud, said O'Leary, president of the American Association of Political Consultants. "Check over at the Better Business Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce, and they'll tell that's an extraordinary record."

O'Leary dismisses complaints about negative campaign advertising as grousing by sore losers. "You never hear the winners talk about negative campaigning," he said. Some candidates "blame their losses on the manner in which the person who beat them got their message across, rather than the message itself."

And yet, this staunch defender of the consulting business is leading an effort to develop, for the first time in the association's 20-year history, an apparatus for policing the industry. The group is revising its code of ethics and is trying to expand the code's coverage to all consultants, identify the approximately the approximately 1,000 who belong to the association, and is urging

candidates who hire nonmembers to incorporate its ethics code into their contracts. For now, the association has no legal standing to enforce its rules industry-wide, but O'Leary said that the group may one day function as a disciplinary body, much as bar associations do for lawyers.

It's a controversial idea, O'Leary acknowledges, especially in the rough-and-tumble world of politics. In fact, a few association members (he won't name them) have quit in protest. Critics say that the association is more interested in expanding its influence than in cleaning up the industry.

But O'Leary says that the industry's explosive growth has made tougher regulation inevitable, and he'd rather see consultants police themselves than be regulated by the government. Sens. Ernest F. Hollings, D-S.C., and John C. Danforth, R-Mo., have introduced a bill to restrict negative advertising, and several state legislatures are discussing regulation of consultants.

The number of political consultants has more than quadrupled since the 1960s, and as campaigning has shifted from a volunteer-intensive enterprise to one dominated by the technology of television and direct mail, "people can go into business

overnight . . . The whole area of political consulting has gotten too big to continue to be a loose, informal type thing," he said.

Even in the association's early days, forging a consensus wasn't easy. The membership ranges from liberals, "a group that believes in government control of nothing," O'Leary said.

O'Leary, 53, seems an unlikely mediator. A fiercely partisan Republican, he has been active in politics since, fresh out of college, he signed on as an advance man in Richard M. Nixon's 1960 presidential campaign. "I'm very fond of Brad, but on a political basis, I think he's outrageous," said Democratic consultant Victor S. Kamber. Kamber and O'Leary co-publish a monthly newsletter, the *O'Leary-Kamber Report*, with a point-counter-point format highlighting their differences.

O'Leary describes his operating style as "street fighter." During an interview, he is a bundle of nervous energy, jumping up from his chair and pacing the floor as he fires off answers between bites of a sandwich.

His Washington-based firm, PM Consulting

Corp., has never flinched from tough fights. It handles direct mail for the National Rifle Association and has been a pioneer in the use of 900-prefix telephone numbers, through which interest groups can flood Capitol Hill with letters and telegrams. O'Leary's specialty is fund raising; his clients have included the National Republican Senatorial Committee and Sens. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, and Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

"He's tough, he's tenacious and he has more creative ideas than just about anybody," said Michele M. Davis, executive director of the Republican Governors Association and a member of the consultants' association board of directors. "He's one of best in the business."

For all his partisan fervor, O'Leary's admirers say that he has persuaded many consultants to think of themselves as professionals with common goals. "He's a business leader," Kamber said. "He wants to help build the stature of the industry."

"Brad has really brought the [association] into the 20th century," Davis said, "and he'll drag it kicking and screaming into the 21st."