



## Duke Energy's Brand Journalism Scores Big



**“People love their trees ... I put myself in homeowners’ shoes and almost know what they’re going to say before they say it. You can learn a lot if you let the customer speak.”** — *Cordy Williamson*

Until January 23 of this year, Cordy Williamson was a well-regarded but largely anonymous arborist for Duke Energy in South Carolina. Williamson had worked for the utility for 54 years, helping customers understand why their beloved trees needed trimming to prevent interference with power lines. It was quiet work, and the polite, self-effacing 74-year-old was good at it. For the same reasons that he was so valuable to the company — he’s diplomatic and unassuming — he never sought publicity.

But that anonymity ended early in 2016 when he was profiled in *The New York Times*. “People love their trees,” Williamson told the *Times*. “Everyone thinks they have the most beautiful tree around. But I come from a humble background and know how to talk to people. When I was young, we listened more than we spoke and spoke softly and with

respect. I put myself in homeowners’ shoes and almost know what they’re going to say before they say it. You can learn a lot if you let the customer speak.”

Of course, companies would love to be seen in as favorable a light as customers view Williamson. That’s why Duke Energy’s communications department chose to tell his story as part of its new brand journalism efforts.

The success with which the company pitched Williamson’s story to the *Times* confirmed to company higher-ups the value of doubling down on Duke Energy’s brand journalism.

Originally, the story was told only on the company’s intranet site. But after news organizations ran their own versions of Williamson’s neighborly outreach efforts, “persuading senior leaders to support the launch of a brand journalism site proved

fairly easy,” Greg Efthimiou, then with Duke Energy, wrote in *The Public Relations Strategist*. “Invoking the ‘triple return on investment’ helped. Two years ago, employees were the sole beneficiaries of the time and expense it took to research, write, edit and publish features.”

And on February 22, one month after the *Times* told Williamson’s story, Duke Energy launched its online entry into brand journalism, called [Illumination.duke-energy.com](http://Illumination.duke-energy.com).

“The driving factor in starting the site was that we were telling these stories internally, and employees wanted to share them,” says Michael Weinstein, a former longtime *Charlotte Observer* editor who is now a lead communications consultant on the content and employee communications team.

“But to share the stories, they had to cut and paste them, which was pretty cumbersome,” he says. “Also, our social media team wanted to share the stories with the public. It was just good storytelling, so we decided to go forward with a brand journalism initiative and make these stories accessible to the public and to the media.”

Although the men and women in the C-suite were never dubious about the objectives of the brand journalism program, they needed some persuading when it came to its journalistic methods.

There are risks in moving beyond corporate PR and into something more akin to straight, no-holds-barred newspaper reporting. Sometimes, you can interest a news organization in a story, its reporters pursue it and their sleuthing can take them in a different direction altogether. When that happens, your name might never be mentioned.

So convincing executives “to support our new storytelling approach was a tougher sell,” Efthimiou wrote. “It is easy to agree to put the audience’s interests and needs first, but some found it difficult to imagine Duke Energy’s name surfacing only late in a feature — or perhaps not at all.”

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## Inside

# Why Companies Are Getting More Engaged on Social Issues

By Doug Pinkham  
Public Affairs Council President



Major corporations are facing growing pressure to weigh in on social issues — and much of this pressure is coming from employees themselves, says a new Public Affairs Council study, *Taking a Stand: How Corporations Speak Out on Social Issues*.

The poll of 92 businesses in a wide variety of industries finds that, over the last three years, 60 percent have experienced rising stakeholder pressure to speak out on social issues such as discrimination, the environment, education and human rights. No respondents reported that pressure had decreased.

According to the survey, the two groups with the most influence over a company's decision to get involved are senior management and regular employees. This counters the common narrative that corporations speak out primarily because they're trying to pacify external critics.

**74%**  
of respondents said they expect pressure on corporations to get involved [in social issues] will increase over the next three years.

In fact, only half the respondents said customer opinions have affected their decision to get involved or not get involved, and less than 40 percent said activists, shareholders and others groups have been influential.

A strong majority of companies also believe that higher expectations for engagement on social issues are here to stay. Seventy-four percent of respondents said they expect pressure on corporations to get involved will increase over the next three years.

Why this newfound interest in social issues? It's actually not that new when you consider the number of companies that have weighed in on environmental and discrimination policies in recent decades. What's different now is: (1) the level of controversy arising from laws that restrict rights based on sexual

orientation or gender identity, (2) Corporate America's realization that many social issues are really business issues and (3) the growing willingness of companies to step out of the shadows and take a public stand.

Earlier this year, for instance, North Carolina passed a controversial law that eliminates LGBT anti-discrimination protections and requires people in government buildings to use only restroom and changing facilities that correspond to the gender indicated on their birth certificates.

More than half of the companies participating in the survey said they have been directly involved in efforts to end discrimination and restrictions based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Some companies have gone so far as to boycott events or business activities in North Carolina.

Deena Fidas, the director of the Workplace Equality Program at the Human Rights Campaign, told *The Washington Post* in April that corporate support for this issue has grown as businesses have revamped their discrimination policies, changed employee benefits and become more familiar with the LGBT community. Once corporate leaders took steps to provide equality for LGBT employees, opposing government-sanctioned discrimination seemed like a logical next step. Plus, no large company wants to have to deal with a patchwork of different employment and civil rights laws throughout the country.

In a recent commentary in *Fortune*, Aaron Chatterji of Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, says he believes corporate leaders — particularly younger ones — have “genuine conviction” about social issues that has driven their personal involvement. CEO views have been shaped, in part, by “a new wave of business education that has emphasized the social responsibility of business and thinking beyond simply maximizing shareholder value.”

Because many of these younger business leaders are clustered in urban areas such as San Francisco, Boston and New York, much of their activism has focused on supporting progressive rather than conservative policy positions, adds Chatterji.

In the Council study, expectations for involvement were shown to be highest among companies with more than \$15 billion in annual revenue. More than three-quarters of these companies said they experienced increased pressure to weigh in on social issues.

Overall, high percentages of companies said they have been most involved in recent efforts to protect the environment (74%); end

## Strategies Companies Have Used to Advocate on Social Issues

**64%**  
Joined a coalition

**51%**  
Lobbied at State/Local Level

**49%**  
Press Release/Public Statement

**45%**  
Lobbied at Federal Level

**43%**  
Signed Petition

**40%**  
Issued Formal Policy Position

discrimination/restrictions based on sexual orientation (59%), gender (54%), gender identity (52%) or race (50%); improve access to quality education (59%) and protect human rights abroad (49%).

Publicly traded corporations were more likely than private companies to experience growing pressure to engage, and they were more likely to be involved in efforts to support various social issues. Very few companies, public or private, reported they had been involved in efforts to oppose any of the listed issues.

It's worth noting that many companies are going beyond issuing press releases to demonstrate their support. In fact, they are using their well-developed lobbying operations to try to change policies they oppose. Among survey respondents, the most common strategies used in social issue advocacy have been joining a coalition and lobbying at the state or local level.

Expect to see this trend continue as more and more companies speak up and take action on social issues.

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## Covering Controversies

Also, some executives are understandably reluctant to allow their own staff writers to write about potentially controversial subjects that include quotes from company critics. But Weinstein says he and his team never faced that problem.

"We believed we did as thorough a job reporting the Catawba River relicensing controversy as any of the independent news organizations did," Weinstein says. "Our stories are multisourced."

Earlier this year, the *Charlotte Observer* gave high marks to the company for venturing "carefully, into subjects that have earned Duke public scorn." Its piece on the Dan River spill, for example, quotes an environmental advocate who described the "devastating blow" of the coal ash spill and the resulting \$102 million criminal settlement.

But the *Observer* also notes that the story describes Duke as a "different company" working to regain public trust, but [also that] minimizes environmental impacts that some scientists say might not be clear for years."

## Never 'Real' Journalism?

Of course, the rap on brand journalism is that it can never be real journalism, despite its good intentions.

"My concern is that brand journalism is designed to tamp down conflict," says Jack Shafer, senior media writer for *POLITICO* and former press critic for *Slate* and Reuters. "The objective is always to put the reader into a kind of comfort zone about conflicts a company is involved in, and the energy industry is by definition fraught with conflict, especially in the environmental area."

Shafer likens brand journalism to sponsored content and native advertising.

None of these practices "are trying to stir things up, the way I think journalism should be doing," Shafer says. "In supposedly 'objective' reporting, when a reporter finds that the facts don't support their hypothesis, they either change the story to fit the facts or they abandon the story altogether. But that is not likely to happen in brand journalism, no matter how sincere the practitioner."

Sincerity has never been an issue for Duke Energy, according to Weinstein. His team "never had a problem with people in the C-suite telling us what we could or could not say because they believe in what we're doing," he says. "We've tackled sensitive issues and tried to present all sides of an issue."

## Top-Down Support

It's important for any organization attempting an effort like Duke Energy's to "understand that this is more about journalism than marketing," Weinstein says. "And anyone embracing brand journalism at this level needs to know they can't succeed without top-down support."

Duke Energy is especially proud of its production of a video mash-up of obsolete power plants being blown up. "We headlined it 'Old Coal-Fired Plants Go Boom,'" Weinstein says. "We set it to Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, and even some of our environmentalist critics posted it on their websites."

## Higher Engagement

So far, Duke Energy's efforts have been rewarding on many levels. Even in their earliest stages, when the team first began offering to traditional media outlets some of the content produced for its intranet site, the company saw results in "higher engagement on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, and surprisingly eager responses from over-worked journalists looking for a story idea or high-quality content to plug into news holes," according to Efthimiou.

Obviously, producing this content takes effort. Duke Energy staffers try to think like news producers and managing editors, meeting regularly in a "newsroom" to flesh out story ideas. Ideally, they develop content that news organizations can use as needed.

To set its course, the team studied comparable efforts by GE, Wells Fargo and Microsoft, and consulted with Mark Ragan, CEO of Lawrence Ragan Communications.

## Clicks Count

So far, the results seem to speak for themselves. "Clicks count online," the *Charlotte Observer* reported, and Duke "scored big" with its piece on Williamson's ability to make nice with "a regularly infuriated public about its tree-trimming practices."

Besides *The New York Times*, the story and video about it received enviable play on Twitter and YouTube. The number of Illumination subscribers continues to rise, and Efthimiou said the company's social media channels "witness a spike in audience engagement whenever we publish another multimedia story that humanizes the company, positions it as an industry and community leader and reinforces its role as a trusted energy adviser."



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What can we learn from refrigerator magnets? A great deal, according to Martin Lindstrom, the author of *Small Data: The Tiny Clues That Uncover Huge Trends*. Refrigerator magnets, well-worn sneakers and other seemingly insignificant items can lead to insights that Big Data misses, Lindstrom argues.

**Q Big Data is one of those terms most of us assume we can define. How do you think of it?**

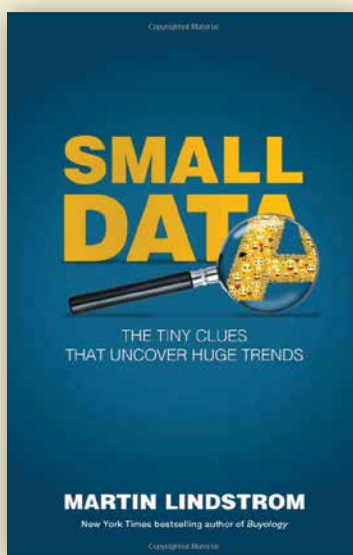
**A** Big Data is the accumulation of enormous amounts of information — maybe from loyalty cards, bank transactions and other sources. That information can disclose patterns we otherwise might miss. But this approach has limitations. Big Data misses emotional connections. To evaluate Big Data, you have to start with a hypothesis, and Big Data is not good at generating hypotheses. But when I look at Small Data — like refrigerator magnets — I look for causation, for why we do things the way we do.

**Q How does that work?**

**A** When I'm working on a project for a client, my team will go into peoples' homes. For Lowes Foods, we visited customers' homes and, with their permission, looked at a lot of their passwords. Many of them created passwords that referred to something they had loved as a younger person and wanted to maintain a connection with — like "myoldfootball team." We saw a variation of "good old days" six times. We hypothesized that people feel that the good old days are disappearing, which gave us insight into how to rebrand Lowes. We designed the store with a nostalgic feel to it.

**Q You also learned a lot, apparently, from a pair of gym shoes.**

**A** That was for Lego. By around Christmas 2003, Lego was in a financial crisis. The Big Data was telling them kids want instant gratification, that they have no patience and time is of the essence. The company began making bigger Lego bricks, making sets simpler and quicker, and sales went down even further. So in our re-



search, we visited this 11-year-old German Lego enthusiast in his room at home. We asked what item he was proudest of. He showed us a pair of sneakers that were worn down in one place. He explained that he was the best skateboarder in his town, and the worn-down place on the shoes was evidence of his commitment, of how much time he devoted to mastering his craft and learning his tricks.

**Q What was your takeaway?**

**A** We realized that this idea of kids having no patience with a complicated challenge is not accurate. For some kids, what they enjoy most about an activity is how involving it can be, and the time they devote to it isn't an issue. In fact, the more time a challenge like skateboarding or building with Legos takes, the more they enjoy it. So Lego went back to making more complicated sets with smaller bricks. Then came *The Lego Movie* and now Lego is the world's largest toymaker.

**Q Talk about those refrigerator magnets.**

**A** We looked at how different people in different countries display the magnets. In Russia, the magnets are set very low on the fridge. That way children can interact with them. There's a reason for this. In some parts of Russia, you will still see children playing with a rock — something that almost never happens in the U.S. Kids in the U.S. have a lot of toys, but children in Russia often do not, so the refrigerator magnets serve a similar function.

**Q How did that insight affect your work?**

**A** Figuring this out led to the creation of an online toy store for Russians with inexpensive items. But we also discovered that in Saudi Arabia, refrigerator magnets are at adult eye level, and kids have little connection to them. Magnets in Saudi Arabia tend to depict memories precious to the adults, like places they've visited, so we helped develop a mall designed around the idea of recapturing memories.

**Q What have you discovered about American culture?**

**A** That's interesting because it has political implications. Americans talk a lot about freedom and liberty and how important they are to them. In fact, American culture is highly regulated — and often self-regulated.

**Q How so?**

**A** Americans are very security-conscious, preoccupied with their safety. In the design of hotel rooms, the preferred style is to have no sharp edges. There are warnings on everything; half of an inflatable dolphin for a swimming pool is covered with warnings in different languages telling you what will happen if you try to swallow the

whole thing. Also, Americans are extremely concerned about never giving offense.

### Q What are the political implications of what you have observed about Americans?

A Because Americans are so concerned about not giving offense, they have developed a political-correctness culture. A lot of Americans are sick of it, which is why we have this phenomenon called Donald Trump. Like him or not, his success in the primaries is evidence of how sick people are of PC culture.

### Q What are the business implications of Americans' concerns with not giving offense?

A Americans like to talk about “thinking outside the box,” but right now, very little of that kind of thinking is going on. In part, that’s due to Americans’ reluctance to speak forthrightly. A lot goes unsaid.

### Q In what way?

A Companies in one industry too often tend to compare themselves with peers inside that industry. But creativity comes

from combining two things that don’t seem to fit together. People need to learn from those in other industries. Who would ever think Apple would become the biggest music company in the world? Or a car company? Or buy a bank? But Apple is doing all those things. That’s innovation. That’s creativity.

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## The Secret Behind Bipartisan Bargaining

Next time you hear talkers on TV bemoaning polarization in Washington and wishing the “grown-ups” would assert themselves, consider this: Political compromise has far less to do with the personalities of the players than with external circumstances unrelated to respective levels of maturity.

A willingness to work with opposition leaders also has little connection to the personal relationships of the players. Such cooperation depends far more “on predictable features of the bargaining environment” than on whether the negotiators are pugnacious and inflexible, or reasonable, good-natured and accommodating.

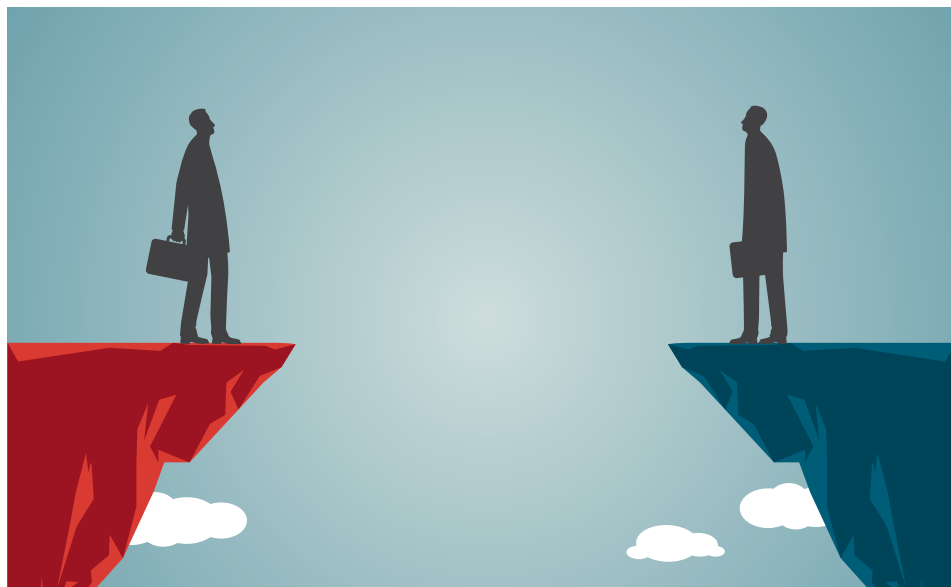
That’s the finding of Matthew N. Beckmann of the University of California, Irvine, whose research appears in the May 2016 issue of *Legislative Studies Quarterly*.

Beckmann and almost 50 undergraduate research assistants studied 40 years of political compromise, spanning 20 Congresses and eight presidencies, using 15,000 Daily Diaries of presidential activities.

They looked at episodes that are remembered for the willingness of presidents and congressional leaders from opposition parties to compromise — Lyndon Johnson and Everett Dirksen on civil rights, and Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich on welfare reform, among others.

### Scandals and Lame Ducks

After measuring a number of factors, including the frequency of conversations between presidents and opposition leaders, Beckmann concludes that compromise is most likely to occur, for example, when a president is popular.



It is least likely to occur when one is mired in scandal or facing re-election. Lame ducks can almost never strike a deal.

Compromise is reasonably predictable when presidents are coupled with politically weak opposition leaders on Capitol Hill — weak enough to need to accept a deal but institutionally strong enough to persuade their colleagues to accept it. In fact, both sides need to be weak enough to need a deal; otherwise, one side can just dig in and no compromise is reached.

Bipartisan bargaining, Beckmann writes, “remains possible even with divided government and partisan polarization, though the opportunity window is fleeting: It is open widest when the president is popular, early during his time in office, and well before the next election approaches.”

### Low Trust Levels

Beckmann doesn’t deny that some aspects of personality come into play. The low levels of trust between George H.W. Bush and Sen. George Mitchell (D-Maine), for example, “seemingly truncated their contact in a context that would otherwise encourage them.” But Jimmy Carter, whose “skin crawled” at the thought of negotiating with Congress, according to former aide James Fallows, interacted with opposing party leaders with a frequency “fairly typical of other postwar presidents,” Beckmann writes.

Chris Matthews can long for the days when Ronald Reagan and Tip O’Neill made nice, but such nostalgia isn’t going to do much good. A clear-eyed view of the realities of political bargaining is a better guide for figuring out when and why compromise is likely to be possible.

# A Visit with ... Christopher "Gindy" Gindlesperger

Vice President of Public Affairs & Communications

National Confectioners Association



**You're one of *The Hill's* 50 "Most Beautiful People" working in politics for 2015. What's your secret?**

I have no clue. How they make those choices is a mystery.

There are nominations, some kind of vetting process and a photo shoot. They won't tell anyone much more about it than that. *The Hill* asked me how I felt about it, and I said, "I feel justified and vindicated because until this year, I was always number 51."

**The last time we interviewed you — for a story on state and local lobbying — was in late 2014. You were then working for the American Beverage Association. What challenges do you face now that you didn't then?**

At the American Beverage Association, we were working to defeat a number of discriminatory policy proposals at the state and local levels, like

the soda ban efforts in New York City. At the National Confectioners Association, our top priority is to ensure that lawmakers and the public understand and appreciate candy's unique rule in a happy, balanced lifestyle. Much of our work is done on the federal level, where we are working on a number of issues, including reduction of the protectionist tariff on cane and beet sugar.

**What is the effect on your members?**

This cuts off access to world sugar prices. Candy manufacturers in this country can only buy a small amount of sugar from other countries. That means our members end up paying roughly twice as much for sugar than they would if they had access to the rest of the global market. Of course, there's so much misinformation floating around about what it would mean if we had free trade in sugar. It's a mistake to think that manufacturers of chocolate, candy, gum and mints would lower the prices of their products. Really what reforming this protectionist policy would do is allow our member companies to reinvest in their companies by hiring more people, expanding their operations and increasing their exports.

**What other misinformation is out there?**

At the local level, there are efforts sometimes to remove candy from retail checkout lanes. There's a belief that people see those displays and purchase a lot of candy as an impulse buy. The reality is that for every 10 trips that consumers make to retail stores, on average, they purchase candy at checkout less than one of those times. Most Americans enjoy candy about twice per week, averaging about 40 calories and about one teaspoon of added sugar per day from confectionery items. Even Michelle Obama, as the nation's foremost advocate of fitness and good nutrition, is fine with that.

**How so?**

We support the First Lady on her valiant educational efforts about moderation and physical activity. Mrs. Obama has made it clear in her statements on nutrition that there is room in people's diets for candy as a treat. She's not against that.

**It sounds fun, representing candy manufacturers.**

It is. For National Candy Month, which was in June, as part of a much larger effort, we committed "Random Acts of Sweetness." We handed out candy at D.C.-area Metro stations.

**How did recipients of the free candy react?**

Sometimes, they'd be kind of grumpy or tired or distracted, but whenever we'd hand them Smarties or Airheads they'd immediately smile. It's magic. One afternoon, I ran into Tom Ridge in Farragut Park while we were handing out Mike and Ikes — he loved it. We all have nostalgic associations with different kinds of candy. But this isn't the only reason this is a product we can feel good about representing.

**What other reasons?**

Candy is the most transparent product there can be. Think about it. Everyone knows what is in our products. Candy is authentic. No one picks up a piece of candy and thinks, "Is there sugar in this?" We all know it's a treat.

**Sounds like you have a good time.**

I do. And so does everyone who spends time here in "Candyland." In June, the Congressional Candy Caucus was established, reaffirming a very important notion: Candy is nonpartisan. It crosses party lines. It brings people together rather than dividing them.

Reach Gindy at 202.203.9006 or [cg@candyusa.com](mailto:cg@candyusa.com).



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## Bono Pro Publico: Rock Icon and Lobbyist

It's now official, at least in Ireland: Bono is a registered lobbyist.

In compliance with the country's lobbying disclosure laws, the U2 front man — born Paul Hewson — is on the Emerald Isle's register for his work to "promote the idea of a world class film studio in Dublin and to foster synergies between the film/creative sector and the tech sector."

Anyone who throws around a phrase like "foster synergies" is obviously no novice in the advocacy "space." That should come as no surprise with Bono. While he is still viewed by much of the public as a mere celebrity spokesperson for a range of causes, he has, in fact, built a mighty sophisticated and well-financed "permanent advocacy organization," according to *The Globalist*, which reported, "U2's most important advance is the institutionalization of its activism in the last decade."

In 2004, Bono and 11 organizations formed ONE, which four years later merged with DATA, Bono's omnibus project to fight AIDS in Africa. By 2007, ONE had received more than \$20 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Also, Bono has pushed for laws requiring full disclosure of payments paid to govern-

ments by mining, oil and gas companies. Such disclosure — which he calls a "transparency revolution" — is designed to expose corruption.

In the U.S., Bono also supported the Cardin-Lugar amendment to Dodd-Frank to require publicly traded energy companies to reveal payments they make to government officials.

Whether you agree with the positions he's taking or not, Bono's efforts might be the model other activist celebrities copy in years to come.



## Who's Who ... Where

**Darren Achord**, formerly deputy chief of staff, Office of Rep. Steve Scalise (R-La.); now senior manager, public policy, Amazon

**Evan Armstrong**, formerly legislative counsel, Office of Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Mich.); now vice president, government affairs, Retail Industry Leaders Association

**Andrew Blascovich**, formerly political action committee manager, National Marine Manufacturers Association; now director, political affairs, BIPAC

**Travis Bullard**, formerly senior manager, communications, Cisco; now director, APCO Worldwide

**Kelly Cole**, formerly, principal, Kelly Cole Strategies; now senior vice president, government affairs, CTIA-The Wireless Association

**Joseph Devaney**, formerly vice president, federal and state relations, Sanofi US; now vice president, government affairs and policy Americas, Astellas Pharma US Inc.

**Amanda Eversole**, formerly president, Center for Advanced Technology and Innovation, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; now head, public affairs, corporate responsibility team, JPMorgan Chase

**Jessica Lenard**, formerly vice president, government and public relations, LEVICK; now director, federal government relations, Tennessee Valley Authority

**Ashley Mancheni**, formerly account supervisor, Quinn Thomas; now principal, The Mancheni Agency

**David Merritt**, formerly managing director, Luntz Global Partners; now executive vice president, public affairs and strategic initiatives, America's Health Insurance Plans

**Brian Toohey**, formerly president and CEO, Semiconductor Industry Association; now senior vice president for international advocacy, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America

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