

Straight talk with an environmental PR expert

O'Dwyer's recently sat down with Aric Caplan, who runs legislative advocacy PR practice Caplan Communications, in Rockville, MD, just outside Washington, D.C. Caplan started his career as Executive Producer of the #1 rated morning show in Pittsburgh at KDKA-AM, and moved on to program director at WJNO-AM in West Palm Beach, FL. After honing his PR skills at Ruder Finn, he founded his firm in 2004, which focuses on the public interest, environmental and renewable energy sectors and national publicity for non-fiction books.

By John O'Dwyer

What drives you and your firm?

Caplan: Our mission is to help our clients work for social and environmental justice. Our firm is in full bloom when we're doing very targeted campaigns with a strong call to action. I get a tremendous honor out of working for causes that we believe in for non-profits and NGOs.

PR is not necessarily just about publicity or message development or media training but about focusing a message on Americans who ought to be inclined to know more about the world around them and engage. And, not be swayed by biased news reports.

So, you're a Greenie?

Caplan: Of course, I strongly believe we need to wean ourselves off our dependence on dirty fuels like oil and coal. Everyone needs to do things that are good for the earth, but that means going beyond just recycling paper and plastic to using green building materials and sustainable business practices for example.

What kind of car do you drive?

Caplan: I have a Toyota Highlander Hybrid that averages 28 mpg and easily holds my wife, two kids and dog. It's so important to set a good example for my kids and the next generation as a whole.

Can the Green movement create the jobs America needs?

Caplan: Definitely, and it already has. Clean energy jobs are so important. They're at the core of what this generation needs. The skill sets of workers in the manufacturing, oil and coal industries lend themselves to more sustainable jobs in solar and wind production. If we have to mine coal, it must be done in a sustainable way. That means no more mountaintop removal coal mining and stopping the EPA from issuing future permits across Appalachia. But Clean Coal is not really possible, it's just a fallacy.

Look at American ingenuity and the environmental entrepreneurs out there

such as companies producing the most efficient windows and on our farms using biomass to create clean energy from abundant crop waste like woodchips and corncobs, etc. These all are real jobs created by the Green movement. And more importantly, Green jobs are good because they keep the jobs and technology in the U.S. Becoming a country that doesn't produce much anymore and always imports is killing off jobs for working families.

What's your take on global warming?

Caplan: The truth is that climate scientists don't really disagree on global warming. Opponents just want to kick the can down the road, raise doubt and keep the doubt going. I can't help but laugh at those who scoff at global warming because we're having such a cold winter. I learned long ago that weather is a day-to-day occurrence while climate relates to events over long periods of time.

Furthermore, deforestation is having a very real affect on the global climate. You obliterate the forests — and I mean slow growing forests — whether in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida or in the Amazon, and then there's nothing to absorb the carbon dioxide produced by power plant emissions and cars. As a result, for instance, oceans absorb this carbon dioxide, creating ocean acidification in coral reefs. The results can be irreversible to habitat species that die off while ocean temperatures increase and sea levels rise. It's all very urgent and something the American people must take action to stop.

The American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 (ACES) passed the House early last summer but the Climate Bill still needs to pass this year in the Senate. Comprehensive climate legislation aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (CO2) 17 percent by 2020 and includes improved energy efficiency incentives for commercial buildings and our homes as well as leveling the

clean energy playing field and encouraging more green jobs.

U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, is fighting this bill though, saying it will increase the marginal tax rate in her state. Her more urgent crusade is to weaken the EPA with a "Dirty Air Act" by stripping EPA's legal authority to enforce the Clean Air Act, which is arguably the most successful and cost-effective environmental law in history.

I just believe conditions have to get to the point where Green becomes the standard and not some lofty or futuristic ideal.

Where do you stand on the healthcare reform debate?

Caplan: Last fall I was invited to the White House along with small business leaders from all types of industries to meet with President Obama to discuss how healthcare reform will affect the American people and the weight small companies like my own are shouldering. I was proud to represent a professional group known as Green America.

After the summit I really came away with the impression that the President clearly understands the undue healthcare burden placed on small business. He made a solid case as to why small business will benefit from reform.

The bottom line is that healthcare reform will help a tremendous number of people. We've got to get past the "haves and have nots" mentality and acknowledge it's a human rights issue.

Can the Obama Administration turn things around?

Caplan: I see real recovery coming by the end of the year. The important thing is for Republicans and Democrats to have all voices heard for the common good of all the American people. ●



Aric Caplan