

WE'RE ALL ACTIVISTS NOW

Garry Walsh tells **Andrew Alexander** that US-style, campaigning public affairs is taking hold in Brussels

Garry Walsh was once included in a national newspaper list of 'vampire executives', as a lobbyist with clients on the west coast of the US and little respect for time zones.

The newly appointed managing director of APCO's Brussels office still travels and takes conference calls at "horrendous times", but since moving from the UK in 2004 has specialised in central and eastern European member states.

"I got over to Brussels just about the point of enlargement, so we went from 15 to 25, and now to 27, and what happens in Bucharest and Berlin and Paris and Tallinn matters in a European context, and so I've spent a lot of my time, about 40 per cent over the last few years, flying around the different national capitals running public affairs activities from a very Euro-centralised perspective. But that's been interesting as well because you get to see a bit about how the microcosm of Brussels is judged in the member states.

"Obviously, in the UK you've got occasionally polarised positions, and where you don't quite have that in other member state capitals, it is interesting to see how Brussels is viewed. Much as if you were a DC lobbyist, it's good to look beyond the beltway occasionally, it's great to get out of Brussels and actually experience it."

Walsh enjoys being based in Brussels because he has never been "100 per cent focused on any one market", and Brussels allows him to have an internationalist rather than a Eurocentric approach.

Having once wanted to be a lawyer, and after a stretch as assistant to several Conservative MPs in Westminster in the mid-1990s, Walsh worked for PPS and then Text 100 spin-off AUGUST.ONE Communications, with Microsoft his most significant client.

This led to working on European spam legislation, and he seems to enjoy the technology angle – which "sort of grew on me" – because it is also no respecter of borders.

He talks with relish of working on the

Computer Implemented Inventions Directive, covering software patents. "It became passionate and it had everything from protests to public demonstrations.

"That was fun, that was 'campaigny', and I think Europe has become the focus



for the new wave of activism that has the ability to use the internet and things like that to coordinate and organise on a pan-European scale, and actually can be quite impacting, quite campaigny.”

Walsh sees more similarities between Brussels and Washington DC than he did while a lobbyist in London, with a thrust towards campaigning.

“I think I went over to Brussels at a point where Europe was getting more interesting for enterprises and for businesses: there was a move away from the issues-management of old, that it was great to be right on paper.

“I think companies started to look at Brussels and think, actually I need to win this one and I don’t want to have the smug sense of self-satisfaction that my arguments were right but I still lost.”

He notices the American influence on Brussels, and thinks it is a “great place to hub network business”.

“If you look at APCO in Brussels; we have a chunk of our clients that are deeply immersed and deeply interested in what is going on in the EU institutions and the broader instruments that control the EU.

“We also have a lot of clients who are interested in pan-European media and interested in influencing stakeholders and building relationships across Europe. And if I look at my own office, I’ve got 15, 16 different nationalities under one roof, it’s very hard to go somewhere else in the world and find that.”

APCO has a team of about 50 people in Brussels, but Walsh says he can see it rising to 70 in two or three years with “genuine growth potential” in the market, and plenty of business for a firm known for its mergers and acquisitions work.

Walsh’s wife is American, and would like one day to move back to the US. But he says the decision to stay in Brussels was a “no-brainer”: He is enjoying himself too much to go anywhere else.

It is having more influence over a “great team of people” that he says he relishes most about the new job. “Helping those guys and providing them with careers and training opportunities and career paths and opportunities to grow as individuals, I think it’s just an amazing thing to sit and do, one of my key motivators.

“I’ve worked in big PR firms so I’ve seen the people management at perhaps a less rosy angle.”

A fairly evangelical brand ambassador for APCO, Walsh insists the company is “absolutely global”. “I have such great relationships with my colleagues in other offices around the world, we have employee exchange programmes, we’ve got three people from Brussels this year – one to New York, one to Tel Aviv and one to Beijing, so we make a hell of an investment in terms of being “global”.

“I think because of our independence, because we don’t have to go to a board in

New York periodically to explain what the figures are doing, I think we can make decisions such as opening an office in new territories and I think we’ll continue to have that ability to move to where our market needs are. It really doesn’t feel like a very big organisation.”

He sees public affairs in Brussels continuing to change after the latest round of accession, with the intake of a “generation of rising people” – some former prime ministers or foreign ministers – from new member states strengthening the European Parliament’s hand. Talking about the merits of brand, he prizes some of the “grey hair” talent the company can attract, including former Czech Republic Commissioner Pavel Telicka and former president of the EU Parliament, Pat Cox.

And he takes a bullish approach to the company and the industry’s future. “Having people who ‘get’ politics is quite important right now, but the client of tomorrow is going to want people who understand what business does.”

An understanding of what directors and chief executives want, and “bedding in” with the company is, he says, “in the DNA of everything we do”.

“I’m very lucky with some of my clients, I work very closely with CEOs and they’re not that interested in politics, they’re interested in politics as it’s impacting their business, and getting that right is fundamental, having a business eye and not just doing things the way you’ve done them for years.”

Walsh sat on the APPC for several years, a body he says he hugely respects, and is interested in questions about industry regulation. From four years as a councillor on Westminster Council he says he knows lobbyists include everyone from global public affairs companies to residents’ associations complaining about mobile phone masts.

Asked if some – NGOs like Greenpeace, for instance – get preferential treatment, he says “perhaps”.

“I think it comes down to transparency. The more open the lobbying industry is and the more what we do is understood by wider stakeholder groups, the less finger-pointing and suspicion you get, and I think that’s quite crucial.”

He is implicitly sceptical about the value of the Kallas proposals, and thinks the industry in Europe will learn to self-regulate, as it did in the UK. “The more open and transparent we are, the more conscious we are of the need to self-regulate and weed out bad practice, the less need there is for government to bring in legislation.”

He says the “cool thing” about the public affairs industry is the range of backgrounds on offer: “Some lobbyists represent commercial interests and some NGOs and the public and consumer organisations. I think by us all contributing you get better law.”

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