

## **Astroturfing – The ‘acceptable’ spin on things?**

Astroturfing dates back to the 80s. The late US Senator Lloyd Bentsen is believed to have coined the term. He was quoted by the Washington Post in 1985 using it to describe a "mountain of cards and letters" sent to his office to promote insurance industry interests, which he dismissed as "generated mail."

So what is astroturfing? Astroturfing describes a political, advertising or public relations campaign that seeks to create the impression that it is **spontaneous, and has the natural and popular support of the community**. So, in short, Astroturfing refers to **faking** popular opinion, hence the reference to the **artificial** grass Astroturf.

The aim of these campaigns is to disguise the efforts of political or commercial entities as an independent public reaction to the person, the group the person represents, produces and/or services. Astroturfers attempt to portray support for their causes by diverse and geographically distributed individuals.

Viral marketing campaigns that can be used to improve brand awareness or increase product sales are classic examples of astroturfing. The campaigns can use people whose opinion matters, and have good social networks to spread a particular message. Because of these individual's influence on their networks, the people they interact with and share this message, will in turn also spread the message. Different media including word of mouth and bloggs are used to put these messages across.

Since 2005, the People's Republic of China has been using a web based astroturfing campaign whose role is to deliver favorable comments towards the government policies. Bloggs and message boards are used to 'spin' the public opinion on these government polices.

I have come across a lot of anti-astroturfing campaigns, and rightfully so, as a considerable number of astroturfing campaigns are extremely misleading and self serving. But astroturfing is not all bad. From a policy viewpoint, there are some policies that do not see the light of day because of public outcry of how inhibitive, or how they only serve the government, or a particular political party. Some of these policies are actually for the greater good, and people do not realise it until it is too late.

Maybe the liquor laws in Botswana are a bit excessive, and maybe they are not. When they were introduced - if astroturfing had been used to portray widespread support for the laws, we might have given them a little ponder and realised that maybe, just maybe, they are not as bad as we think. That is open for debate, and we can also take a closer look and see if astroturfing actually works or not.

So is astroturfing acceptable spin? - If used for the greater good – yes, I think.