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Wal-Mart's new voter-drive initiative could backfire

By Amy Showalter

After shunning politics for years, Wal-Mart, the nation's largest private employer, recently launched a voter registration and education campaign targeted at its 1.3 million employees.

Labor-funded groups have long targeted Wal-Mart, but until very recently the mega-store has taken pains to stay out of the political fray. Political and business analysts have likened the world's largest retailer to a gladiator striding into the political arena, ready to fight back by getting its employees to the polls to vote in the company's interests.

Empowering employees is a positive step, but it would be a mistake to assume the voter drive will help Republicans at the ballot box. It could just as easily backfire and result in a new crop of registered voters who may not have the company's best interests at heart.

Wal-Mart's initiative is not without precedent. A growing number of corporations, including Nationwide, ExxonMobil and DaimlerChrysler, have organized in-house voter registration efforts, making it easy for workers to download voter-registration forms and apply for absentee ballots.

But it takes more than handing out a few forms to get people to the polls. Companies thinking that with a little help their employees will vote for candidates who support the corporation's goals are being unrealistic. Creating an emotional allegiance to your issues so that employees know whom to vote for without being told whom to vote for is an entirely different and long-term endeavor. Company officials have to take the time to teach employees about the political process and the industry issues that affect them.

This is especially important in Wal-Mart's case because it is counterintuitive to think most of its employees are going to vote for pro-business candidates. If Wal-Mart's employees formed a massive voting bloc, it would have better-than-average representation in categories traditionally dominated by Democrats: women and minorities. Of Wal-Mart's U.S. employees, 60.5 percent are female



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and nearly 32 percent minority. Nearly 17 percent of Wal-Mart's employees are 55 or older.

Wal-Mart says its voter registration efforts are non-partisan, and that its efforts to engage employees have been simply to correct the misinformation spread by its detractors.

Last summer the retailer took a first step and sent a letter to its 18,000 Iowa employees to refute statements made by Democratic candidates during a "WakeUpWalMart" bus tour organized by Wal-Mart opponents. Meanwhile, the corporation has increased its spending on lobbying to more than \$1.6 million last year from nearly \$1.2 million in 2004, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. This is laudable and necessary.

But the real work of creating a culture of civic engagement takes time and effort. I directed the efforts of employee volunteers to register their colleagues to vote for nine years as manager of a Fortune 500 corporate employee grassroots program. In that time, our nonpartisan voter registration efforts resulted in more than 10,000 new voters.

We know that when they voted, they took into consideration a candidate's position on our company's issues. In fact, more than 65 percent of the members of the employee grassroots program said they took the candidate's position on our issues into account when they entered the voting booth. Why? Because we created a culture of civic engagement that encouraged employees to contact their elected officials on issues that affected the industry and their paychecks. It was imbedded in the company culture. Voter registration was simply one of many company-endorsed activities we offered to increase their civic engagement.

It would be useful to survey the employees of corporations that have enthusiastically embraced voter registration to find out how many actually considered a candidate's position on their company's issues when casting their vote. I'll bet the answer is very few. Companies have to earn their employees' allegiance.

Amy Showalter owns The Showalter Group Inc., a Cincinnati-based firm that advises trade associations, Fortune 500 companies and nonprofit organizations on how to increase their grassroots and PAC effectiveness.

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