



## What “Product” Are You Managing?

by Kerry Knott

*Chairman of the Board, C.S. Lewis Institute*

It was the Spring of 1982. As I was nearing the end of my marketing studies at Auburn University, I sent resumes to virtually every business consulting firm and dozens of major corporations inquiring about openings for “product managers.”

My plan was to get a job overseeing the development and marketing of a product.

It became readily apparent after a couple of months that I was aiming a bit high. The only marketing jobs I was offered were sales jobs that didn’t excite me at all. So, I decided to make a trek to Washington, D.C., where I had friends from a Georgetown University summer program. I drove up, and after a week of knocking on doors with no good result, joined a friend for a softball game on the Mall. I played a good game, and a teammate asked if I could play with them the next week. I mentioned that since I hadn’t found a job, I was heading home the next day. He said, “I have someone you need to meet.”

This new friend, Lenny, invited me to join Morton Blackwell, then the head of Public Liaison in the Reagan White House, for an inner tube ride down the Shenandoah River that weekend. Morton “interviewed” me as we floated down the river, and suggested I meet him at the White House early Monday morning. Morton referred me to another friend at an issue advocacy group in Springfield, Virginia. I interviewed there Monday afternoon. The last question they asked was, “If we hired you, how soon could you be in New Mexico?” I said I would drive home the next day and get on a plane the day after that. He said, “You’re hired.”

And so began my long journey into politics and later a lobbying career.



*Kerry Knott*

I spent five months working on campaigns in New Mexico, then in 1983 I headed up a year long, state-wide campaign in Alabama. The next year—1984—I was hired by an unknown college professor named Dick Arme y to run his campaign for Congress. Arme y won in a squeaker, and I came to Washington with him. I ended up spending fourteen years as Arme y’s Chief of Staff on Capitol Hill, and got to play a significant role in developing the Contract with America in 1994 and in enacting several major pieces of legislation.

I left the Hill at the end of 1998 and joined Microsoft to manage their Capitol Hill outreach. After four interesting years, I was hired by Comcast to start their Government Affairs department, and now I manage Comcast’s federal, state, and local government affairs activities.

As I look back on my career, what strikes me is that my original goal of becoming a product manager actually came to fruition. It just wasn’t the way I had planned. I became a manager of a statewide issue campaign at age 22; a manager of a successful congressional campaign at age 23; and Chief of Staff to a Member of Congress at age 24, where I helped manage issue campaigns, reelection campaigns, and later a national effort to redefine the Republican Party and bring serious change to the nation. At Microsoft and Comcast, I was heading up large legislative and public relations campaigns. Had I succeeded in landing a junior product manager role out of college, I suspect it would have taken me a decade to amass the kind of experience I got in just a few short years. Clearly, God knew what He was doing when He orchestrated that tubing trip.

During those years while my professional life progressed, I began to realize that some other aspects of my life needed attention. While I was raised by godly parents in a small town in Alabama, I started drifting away in my early teens

and even more so after my father passed away when I was fifteen. I never doubted the existence of God or the saving message of His Son, but my life didn’t reflect those beliefs in many practical ways. I developed spiritual calluses that soothed my conscience, all the while allowing me to drift further and further away from Him.

In the early 1990s, after breaking up with a girlfriend, I fell into a state of unhappiness with the direction of my life. I was still motivated by work—I was clearly a workaholic back then—but something kept gnawing at me.

I decided to go away—by myself—for a period of introspection and study. I rented a small house on the Outer Banks of North Carolina; took a few books, including the Bible; and started reading, praying, and examining my life.

One of the books I read was Stephen Covey’s *First Things First*. While this was not a “Christian” book, it had a profound message: it doesn’t matter how fast you climb the ladder of success, but what wall the ladder is propped against. Where you’re going means much more than how fast you get there.

I spent the rest of the week praying and studying the Bible. I read *What the Bible is All About* by Henrietta Mears, in which she takes each book of the Bible and explains the context, the history, and how the book fits into the overall story. For the first time in my life, I understood the Bible as one integrated whole, with a continuous story line of redemption. For a while, I had known deep down that I should be living my life for Christ. But the week I spent alone gave me the push to change.

I rededicated my life to Christ and vowed to make major changes in my behavior. While I’m still making mistakes, I’m confident now that God is leading me to become someone useful to His Kingdom.

A few years later, I asked my then-girlfriend (now my wife), Michelle, about any ideas for Bible study groups. I didn’t have a men’s group for honest sharing and building spiritual bonds. Michelle had just received a postcard from the C.S. Lewis Institute seeking people to join a new discipleship group. I joined this group, which became the testing ground for the C.S. Lewis Fellows Program a year later. I made a wonderful new friend in Tom Tarrants, and I proudly joined the inaugural

group of Fellows. From that class and Michelle’s Fellows class two years later, our lives have been enriched by solid friendships, tremendous counseling and mentoring, and a deeper understanding of apologetics and discipleship.

Part of living my life for Christ is remembering that I’m always working for Him. That means working diligently and faithfully, and being honest with my boss, my co-workers, and most of all myself. I try to treat people fairly and with respect, and not shade the truth or dance near the line of ethical or legal behavior. There are plenty of temptations in the lobbying world—we’ve all read about the high-profile unethical lobbyists—but I try to be “salt and light” in this difficult environment. I stay in touch with several other solid Christians in similar positions to provide a sounding board about living as we should in this environment, and I have a small accountability group that keeps me on track in other ways. These kinds of groups are essential in this day and age, no matter what line of work you are in.

If you live a life of integrity and treat people fairly, it does get noticed, and doors do get opened to serious conversations about the truly important things in life.

I’ve found that I can make a difference by participating in organizations that are teaching and mentoring Hill staffers or other professionals. I enjoy speaking to young Hill staffers, interns, and students who are interested in politics or business, and I plant seeds about living life for the right reasons. I’ve also tried to find a few big projects where I can make a difference, whether it’s helping a small inner city Christian school or helping poor women who are fighting addictions to get their lives on track. As a member of the CSLI board, I can help oversee the expansion of the Fellows program as we plan to reach thousands of committed, energetic disciples of Christ.

Another way my wife and I live out our faith is in our neighborhood. Michelle is known as the “Mayor of 27<sup>th</sup> Street” because she (mostly) and I (somewhat) organize the annual block party, invite new families to dinner, keep an eye on the elderly neighbors, organize Christmas caroling, and generally try to reach out with the love of Christ to our neighbors. My wife and I are big supporters of Young Life, and we often host gatherings of high

school kids in our home. Lastly, we try to raise up the next generation of believers by focusing on our three young children.

The Lord has been so faithful to bring me along on my spiritual journey. At this point in my life, my main focus is to manage the “product” of living a godly life. I can’t do this on my own. I need to rely on the Holy Spirit and prayer every day. But through God’s help, I hope I can

help others who may be lost or drifting like I was not too long ago.

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