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"Statehouse Investigations."

CHECKING FOR ILLEGAL CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY

by Dee J. Hall, reporter, Wisconsin State Journal

1. Examine any partisan offices attached to your legislature. More than a dozen states have them. Find out what their policies are regarding campaign work and how they're enforced. Then track down former employees to see whether those policies are followed.

2. Get phone records. Even people with cell phones sometimes slip up and use their government telephones. Compare numbers with those found on campaign Web sites, at political consulting firms, from campaign press releases and candidates' home and office numbers.

3. Develop a web of sources. Ask each source to name as many other sources as he or she can think of who might be helpful to the story. Political watchdog groups can be helpful in finding sources or explaining the political landscape.

4. File public-records requests for documents, photos and graphics. We found that even when records custodians took great care to excise documents that could incriminate them (a crime, by the way), they still sometimes forgot to delete everything. Among hundreds of photos and brochures we obtained electronically from the Assembly Republican Caucus, we found three campaign documents they'd forgotten to delete.

5. Keep all campaign brochures. We found some of the same photos taken by state photographers showed up in literature put out by so-called "independent" political organizations and the candidates themselves. We found one brochure produced as a state publication that was nearly identical to a campaign brochure the caucus produced illegally for a candidate.

6. Talk to first-time candidates. They are the most likely to be candid about people who worked for their campaigns. Ask who designed their brochures, who designed their TV ads, who distributed literature for them, who raised money for them. If they claim not to know, they're either untruthful or perhaps not smart enough to run your state.

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