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AFTER A STUMBLE, TECH LOBBY REFOCUSSES ON IMMIGRATION

By Somini Sengupta
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MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. — On a recent Monday evening, in a large, warmly lighted room at a technology incubator here, guests drank pinot noir, waiters offered seared tuna, and a young man in a T-shirt and sneakers introduced himself to a gathering of tech entrepreneurs as a tech entrepreneur himself: “Hi, I’m Joe Green, president of Fwd.us.”

Mr. Green was pressing the flesh to drum up support for Fwd.us, the advocacy group he created with financial backing from his college roommate, Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook co-founder, and several of their mostly young millionaire friends in Silicon Valley. It was a critical moment for the organization, because soon after making its debut this spring, Fwd.us fumbled badly.

Its stated goal was to overhaul immigration law. But its first steps included financing flashy, campaign-style television ads for conservative lawmakers, whose votes were seen as crucial to passing an immigration bill in the Senate. The ads promoted their pet conservative causes, including the Keystone XL pipeline. Fwd.us immediately lost many of its existing and would-be supporters in the valley.

Now the group is trying to turn around its image as it gears up for the fight for immigration overhaul in the House.

For now, its ads focus squarely on immigration rather than other more incendiary issues like drilling in Alaska or health insurance regulation. Its most recent television spot, for example, praised Kelly Ayotte, Republican of New Hampshire, for supporting the Senate bill last week despite significant opposition in her state. Its latest Web ad is a paean to the ultimate American ideal: the Statue of Liberty.

The group also has a new executive director, Todd Schulte, a veteran political aide with the Washington experience that Mr. Green lacks. And it is organizing tried-and-true town hall meetings like the one here to rally industry support for lawmakers who support a more open immigration policy, including provisions to let tech companies bring in many more foreign engineers. Others are planned in critical battleground districts, like Utah and North Carolina.

This evening, Mr. Green invited entrepreneurs to speak about their run-ins with the immigration bureaucracy. A few engineers from overseas had joined the meeting using Skype; slow-moving, teleporting robots wheeled iPads around the room, showing their disembodied faces glowing on screen. One member of Congress was here to hear their complaints: Representative Mike Honda, a Democrat from nearby San Jose.

Despite the apparent tweaks to its approach, Fwd.us contends its original strategy worked, helping rally senators to pass the landmark immigration bill last week.

“I would argue we’ve been pretty consistent,” said Rob Jesmer, campaign manager at Fwd.us. “We are going to use a lot of different things to try and pass this, to try to affect the process.”

After weeks of silence, Mr. Zuckerberg publicly defended his organization's strategy in mid-June, calling it necessary and "unique."

"That approach — of actually trying to work with people on both sides — is what makes us unique," he wrote in response to questions on his Facebook page, adding: "And without bringing people in different parties and with different views together, meaningful reform will never happen."

His office declined numerous requests for an interview.

The group has not revealed how much money it has raised so far, saying only that it is enough to make a difference in the process. Nor has it revealed any details on how it plans to sway the Republican-controlled House, except that it will back lawmakers who support a favorable immigration bill.

"I like to think we here in Silicon Valley have a different — and I hope, better — way of doing things," Paul Graham, a venture capitalist and a founder of the technology incubator Y Combinator said about his hopes for Fwd.us.

This is precisely what complicates Fwd.us's mission. Its principal constituents, the wealthy entrepreneurs of the valley, like to think of themselves as exceptional — except that some of its tactics have been criticized here precisely for reflecting an unexceptional Beltway approach.

In addition to the controversial ads, Fwd.us hired well-known Washington lobbyists. Its subsidiaries count political veterans like Haley Barbour, a former Mississippi governor and a Republican, and Joe Lockhart, a former spokesman for the Clinton administration, as board members.

Some Washington lobbyists say rewarding lawmakers with costly television ads could have unforeseen consequences for the industry, not least by considerably raising the price of influence.

"Most companies face multiple issues in D.C.," said Alan Davidson, who was Google's legislative director in Washington from 2005 to 2012, and is now a visiting scholar at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"High-profile ad buys on unrelated social issues might help in one debate, but can alienate future allies and set unrealistic expectations," he said. "Hopefully this is just another sign of the tech community's evolution and growing engagement in public policy."

Mr. Zuckerberg has said that he chose to tackle immigration after hearing the life stories of unauthorized students at a junior high school near Facebook's headquarters in Menlo Park, where he taught a class. Although Mr. Green was his choice to lead Fwd.us, Mr. Zuckerberg has taken the heat for the group's missteps. Lately, several people in Silicon Valley have singled out Mr. Green for mismanaging the campaign and in turn, damaging Mr. Zuckerberg's brand.

"If you come out, as Mark did, you come out as a public piñata," said one investor, who, like many people interviewed for this article, declined to be named, because, he said, he did not want to inflame sentiments. The investor said Mr. Green had asked him this year for a

“seven-figure” contribution, with no explanation of Fwd.us’s strategy. He called it a “gun to the temple” approach.

Another industry investor surmised that Mr. Zuckerberg’s personal image had suffered because of the negative attention to the group. “It is not with the masses,” the investor said. “It’s with a few people, insiders in Silicon Valley who have checks to write. A lot of them are angry and disappointed about Joe Green’s approach.”

Mr. Green sent him an e-mail solicitation in early June, the investor said, which he declined because he disagreed with the group’s tactics so far.

Fwd.us declined requests for an interview with Mr. Green. Mr. Jesmer described him as the organization’s “visionary” and said, “We talk to him 14 times a day.”

A graduate of Harvard, Mr. Green in 2007 created a Facebook application for online advocacy and fund-raising, called Causes, and in 2011, joined NationBuilder, a company that makes digital tools for political campaigns. He stayed for just under a year, before joining Fwd.us.

Jonathan Nelson, founder of a networking group, Hackers and Founders, said Mr. Green saw himself as a “pragmatic idealist.” The two met for a beer at Antonio’s Nut House, a popular pub in Palo Alto, in mid-June. Mr. Green, he recalled, said he wanted to win the immigration fight in Washington — and was willing to play ball, Beltway style. Mr. Nelson replied that Mr. Green had misread his fellow geeks.

“It’s a sin in the techno religion to play dirty politics,” Mr. Nelson said.