



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20463

August 12, 2004

CERTIFIED MAIL
RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

ADVISORY OPINION 2004-24

Nathaniel Pearlman
President
NGP Software, Inc.
5505 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite # 277
Washington, DC 20015

Dear Mr. Pearlman:

This responds to your letter dated June 10, 2004, on behalf of NGP Software, Inc. ("NGP") requesting an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended (the "Act"), and Commission regulations to the use of contributor information from the Commission's online public records in a financial software system sold by NGP.

Background

You state that NGP is a for-profit corporation that provides clients with political and reporting software, database design, websites, online contribution processing, and other consulting services. NGP Campaign Office, one of NGP's software products, is "an integrated financial system with fundraising, prospecting, and Federal and State campaign finance reporting features." NGP Campaign Office is available as a web-based online system or a desktop system.

You state that NGP would like to "upgrade" NGP Campaign Office to offer its clients the ability to access, through a client's NGP Campaign Office system database, information about contributions that the client's donors may have made to other candidates, PACs, and party organizations. NGP would "obtain donor contribution histories from the FEC's online public records for individuals, political committees and other persons" and integrate this information into a client's personalized NGP Campaign Office system database.

You state that having comparative donor data would “allow [NGP’s] clients to conduct fundraising more efficiently, and to resolicit existing donors who may have given more to other committees.”

Question Presented

May NGP sell or include contributor information about individuals, political committees, and other persons obtained from the FEC’s online public records as part of an upgrade to its NGP Campaign Office software product?

Legal Analysis and Conclusion

The Act provides that the Commission shall make reports and statements filed with it available to the public for inspection and copying within 48 hours after receipt. 2 U.S.C. 438(a)(4). However, no information copied from such reports or statements may be sold or used by any person for the purpose of soliciting contributions or for any commercial purpose, other than using the name and address of any political committee to solicit contributions from such committee. 2 U.S.C. 438(a)(4); 11 CFR 104.15(a).

Your proposed sale or inclusion of information about contributors (other than information about political committees that are contributors) obtained from the FEC’s public records in NGP Campaign Office would be prohibited under the Act’s restriction on the sale or use of such contributor information. Where the contributors are political committees, the sale or inclusion of information about such contributors obtained from the FEC’s public records is permissible under the Act and Commission regulations.

In requiring disclosure of contributor information, Congress provided limitations to ensure that such information was not misused. Congress was concerned that the Act’s reporting requirements would “open up the citizens who are generous and public spirited enough to support our political activities to all kinds of harassment . . .” 117 Cong. Rec. 30057 (1971) (statement of Senator Bellmon). Senator Bellmon stated that the purpose of the amendment containing the prohibition on use of contributor information was to “protect the privacy of the generally very public-spirited citizens who may make a contribution to a political campaign or a political party.” *Id.*

As the Commission has explained in previous advisory opinions, the purpose of restricting the sale or use of information obtained from FEC reports is to protect contributors from having their names sold or used for commercial purposes. *See* Advisory Opinions 1998-4, 1995-5, 1991-16, 1989-19, 1986-25, 1981-38, and 1980-101. Additionally, in Advisory Opinion 2003-24, the Commission reasoned that section 438(a)(4) is “a broad prophylactic measure intended to protect the privacy of the contributors about whom information is disclosed in FEC public records.”

Your proposed inclusion of information about contributors, other than political committees, as a feature of NGP Campaign Office, a commercially available software product, would be prohibited under the Act and Commission regulations. The

information about contributors, other than political committees, you seek to include in the upgraded version of NGP Campaign Office, including “contributions . . . made to other candidates, PACs and party organizations,” and “contribution histories,” would be “obtain[ed] . . . from the FEC’s online public records.” The inclusion of such information in NGP Campaign Office, whether sold as a separate service or as part of a client’s purchase of the NGP Campaign Office upgrade, would be a prohibited use of contributor information obtained from the FEC’s public records. Such use is for a commercial purpose. Both the Act and the Commission regulations prohibit the use for commercial purposes of such information obtained from FEC reports or statements made available by the Commission for public inspection. 2 U.S.C. 438(a)(4); 11 CFR 104.15(a).¹

However, the Act and Commission regulations do not restrict the sale or use of the name and address of a political committee for solicitation purposes. 2 U.S.C. 438(a)(4); 11 CFR 104.15(a). Additionally, the Commission has allowed the sale or use of more than just the name and address of political committees, and the sale or use of such information for commercial purposes. *See* Advisory Opinions 1989-19 (allowing the commercial sale of unaltered copies of FEC report pages containing contributions from political committees) and 1980-101 (allowing the commercial publication and sale of a directory of comprehensive information concerning political action committees). Accordingly, your proposed inclusion of contributor information about political committees as a feature of NGP Campaign Office would not be prohibited under the Act and Commission regulations.

This response constitutes an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Act and Commission regulations to the specific transaction or activity set forth in your request. *See* 2 U.S.C. 437f. The Commission emphasizes that, if there is a change in any of the facts or assumptions presented and such facts or assumptions are material to a conclusion presented in this advisory opinion, then the requester may not rely on that conclusion as support for its proposed activity.

Sincerely,

(signed)

Ellen L. Weintraub
Vice Chairman

Enclosures (AOs 2003-24, 1998-4, 1995-5, 1991-16, 1989-19, 1986-25, 1981-38, and 1980-101)

¹ The Commission notes that this prohibition would not extend to a campaign’s ability to resolicit its donors based on its own records of donor contribution histories to that campaign, subject to the Act’s contribution limits and restrictions.