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Leader of Campaign Against Seattle's "Amazon Tax" Thinks They Got Scammed on Twitter Ads

by [Eli Sanders](#) • Aug 30, 2018 at 3:15 pm

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Saul Spady, the grandson of the Dick's Drive-In founder and an active leader in the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign, said he has an assumption about what happened. LEON NEAL / GETTY IMAGES

On Tuesday, *The Stranger* reported that while the campaign against Seattle's "Amazon Tax" told regulators it spent \$1,250 on Twitter ads, a weeks-long search by Twitter found no evidence those ads were actually purchased.

The "No Tax on Jobs" campaign wouldn't comment when asked about this for Tuesday's story, but yesterday the campaign quietly revised its disclosure filings to **city** and **state** elections officials. Those revised filings indicate the reported Twitter ad purchase never happened. They also say the campaign sub-vendor that supposedly purchased those Twitter ads back in June will now be refunding the entire amount that was allegedly spent, along with about 70 percent of the money this same sub-vendor supposedly spent on Facebook ads.

Tim Ceis, whose firm **CBE Strategic** was paid \$16,000 for political consulting by the well-financed "No Tax on Jobs" campaign, once again declined to comment on what's happened. The campaign's treasurer, Phil Lloyd, also declined to comment. The sub-vendor in question, a digital consulting firm called **Awareness Analytics Partners**, confirmed to *The Stranger* that it had been paid to set up Twitter and Facebook accounts for the "No Tax

on Jobs" campaign, and to "manage the ad placement for each," but it did not explain why a total of \$2,125.19 in unspent ad money was still in the firm's hands more than two and a half months after the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign achieved its objectives.

"We were paid for the ads so that was what we reported," wrote Andy Bookless, managing partner for Awareness Analytics Partners (also known as A2P), in an e-mail. "We understand now that the financial disclosure report required actual spend. We've worked with the campaign to ensure the finance reports are updated and that unused funds are returned to them."

Bookless, whose firm lists a Pennsylvania address in disclosure forms, has not yet responded to follow-up questions. He has not answered, for example, whether his firm would have kept the money if *The Stranger* had not reported on Tuesday that the money was likely never spent on Twitter ads.

But Saul Spady, the grandson of the Dick's Drive-In founder and an active leader in the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign, said he has an assumption about what was going on with Awareness Analytics Partners.

Spady, who's officially listed as the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign's **secretary**, and whose own digital marketing firm was paid \$31,000 by the campaign for "social media management," told *The Stranger*: "What I assume happened is, they were skimming."

Bookless has so far offered no response to Spady's charge.

* * *

When the opaque world of digital ad purchasing meets the fast-paced world of large, well-funded political campaigns, Spady explained, skimming is easy to pull off. And the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign, which formed in May, was certainly well-funded, reporting nearly \$500,000 in donations from Amazon, Starbucks, and other major local businesses that wanted to torpedo a tax, set to be calculated based on their number of employees, that would have funded homelessness services.

"If your client's not checked in and you really don't care about the long-term relationship, [skimming] could be done pretty easily," Spady said. He stressed he's never done it himself because it would be bad for business, but added: "I've known firms that have done it, and in this case that's what it smells like to me."

A major Seattle political consultant who wasn't involved in the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign echoed Spady's claim about the ease of skimming. "Yes, it is very easy to skim," this consultant said, "and there's lots of interesting ways in the political-consulting-industrial

complex to do this.”

Yet another major Seattle political consultant, who also wasn't involved in the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign, added that the failure of tech companies to comply with Washington State's unique laws on political ad transparency contributes to the ease with which a consultant could claim to have bought online ads that were not, in fact, purchased.

“In some sense, the secrecy of these big social media behemoths—their opaqueness, their unwillingness to disclose information, and their unwillingness to comply with Washington State law—has made it easier for third-party scammers,” this consultant said.

In other words: Full disclosure about political ads from tech platforms is not just good for democracy and the voting public. It would also help candidates and political consultants make sure the money they allocate for digital ads actually does get spent on digital ads.

Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson **is currently suing Facebook and Google** for an alleged decade of failure to comply with state transparency laws when it comes to online political advertising. Twitter, which is a much smaller player in the political ad business than Facebook and Google, is not being sued by Ferguson.

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Taken as a whole, the amount of money political campaigns spend on digital ads has exploded in recent years. In Seattle, purchases of Facebook ads by local political campaigns **increased by 5,000 percent** between 2013 and 2017. In statewide races, according to Ferguson's lawsuit, campaigns have collectively spent **\$4.6 million** purchasing ads on Facebook and Google since 2008. Nationally, according to estimates, a grand total of **\$1.4 billion** was spent on digital advertising at all levels of politics during the 2016 election cycle. Amid that wave of digital-directed cash, local political consultants said, there's plenty of opportunity for dishonestly pocketing a little—or even a lot—here and there.

The problem with the "No Tax on Jobs" campaign's alleged Twitter ads began to emerge earlier this month when Twitter, after being prodded by the Washington State Public Disclosure Commission, responded to a July 12 request from *The Stranger* for details on those supposedly purchased ads. After its search, Twitter said it could find "no evidence" those ads were ever bought.

The "No Tax on Jobs" folks are not alone in having to revise their accounting of digital ad spends in recent local campaigns. In response to *Stranger* reporting, the campaign of Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan in May revised its spending on Google ads **way downward**, from \$54,925 to \$3,403.

The Durkan campaign blamed that on "an error on the part of one of our vendors."

"What you're reporting here raises real questions about how trustworthy some of these social media consulting firms are," said one of the major Seattle political consultants. "It really does make us think that in the future we're going to have to give more scrutiny to our social media ad buys and the firms that are placing them. We need to make sure that we're actually getting what we're paying for."

The other major Seattle consultant added that beyond the opaqueness surrounding online political ads, there's also a generational divide that makes certain candidates and campaigns vulnerable to getting conned by unscrupulous advisors or sub-vendors. For older politicians, this consultant said, digital advertising is "a little bit of a mystical experience." They know this much: "Kids are doing it, seems like an important thing." But, this consultant said, they don't know a whole lot more—and often don't want to know a whole lot more.

"They don't really care," the consultant said. "They're just like, 'Put some money on Twitter.'"

This consultant suggested one essential step for candidates and campaigns buying online political ads through sub-vendors: "Get the receipts."

But, this consultant added, "people don't have time to look at that and don't want to." What they want is data. Analytics. "And firms can just make that stuff up."

(Spady said that at his firm, **Cre8tive Empowerment**, rather than bill clients after the fact for social media ad purchases he's made on their behalf, he buys his clients' social media ads on his clients' own credit cards. This allows them to clearly see the total spent on digital ads. He then charges a percentage of that total spend as his commission.)

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A third major Seattle consultant questioned whether skimming is any more of a problem in digital ads than it is in, say, the world of political snail-mail. "If someone told me to mail a mail piece to another county, and they don't live in that county, how would they know?" this person asked. "It's like very many things in business."

But this consultant also admitted there is something a bit more ephemeral and hard-to-verify about online ads, particularly online ads that are micro-targeted so that they appear on the screens of relatively few voters for a brief period of time, and then disappear forever.

Spady, for his part, said he's not mad—or all that surprised—about what he assumes happened with the "No Tax On Jobs" campaign's phantom Twitter ads.

"It doesn't upset me," Spady said. "That coalition accomplished the goal, which was to work with voters to gather enough signatures to send a message to the council." (And the council **certainly received** that message; Seattle's "Amazon Tax" is now in the legislative trash bin.)

Spady said he hopes the refunded money from the phantom ads is donated to charity.

Going forward, he added, "It's a warning for all of us to be a little more aware, and to search for firms that really do their due diligence for this work."

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Eli Sanders

Eli Sanders is The Stranger's associate editor. His book, "While the City Slept," was a finalist for the Washington State Book Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. He once did this and once won this, but he also once crashed his bike into a parked car while on his way to a staff meeting, never mind this, so... His website, which probably hasn't been updated in a while, is www.elisanders.net.



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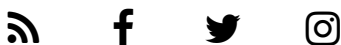
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