

**US Chamber...**

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Tom Donohue, U.S. Chamber of Commerce President, threatens candidates who dare to be pro-consumer.

"I will disclose any funds I am legally required to disclose - and not disclose any others," Donohue said. "We are exercising our constitutional right to petition the government and we will continue to do so."

In 2004, the chamber also helped defeat Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle, flooding his home state of South Dakota with money, ads and more than 50 on-the-ground organizers.

This year that kind of ground tactic is going to be more prevalent, Donohue said, noting that the chamber plans to make use of its ability to communicate freely with its 3 million member companies located in every congressional district.

In the interview Monday, Donohue said he was un-

happy with anti-corporate rhetoric coming from candidates in both parties and he wanted candidates to know about the chamber's ambitious plans.

Donohue is not likely to name names at his news conference, but there is no doubt he is unhappy about Huckabee.

The concerns Donohue expresses reveal apprehension that Republican pro-business candidates may lose favor with voters and that the GOP's important but fragile alliance between economic and social conservatives is showing signs of strain.

Even more than Republicans, Democratic candidates have boosted the volume of populist messages as the economy softens. Edwards, whose trial lawyer past has been openly criticized by Donohue for years, launched new advertisements that warn against

the danger of replacing "corporate Republicans with corporate Democrats."

The middle class, Edwards says in the new ad, is "losing ground while CEOs pocket million-dollar bonuses and corporate lobbyists get their way in Washington."

Donohue, in effect the nation's leading business advocate, kicked back hard at some of the leading Democratic proposals on taxes, labor law and the courts.

If that agenda succeeds, he said, Democrats "will be gone from power for at least 40 years," though he acknowledged that the political rhetoric might moderate after the primary season.

"People on the other side have been very strong in the way they play in legislation and elections. We intend to do the same," he said.

**Incredible lawsuit tales**

By RICK CASEY, Houston Chronicle



Recently one of my oldest and dearest friends, a man whose Harvard Ph.D. doesn't begin to measure his intellect and wisdom, sent out one of those mass e-mails meant to amuse and appall.

"OMG! It's even worse than we thought," his message began. It was followed by something called the annual Stella Awards, a list of the year's seven "most outlandish lawsuits and verdicts in the U.S."

In last place was the tale of Kathleen Robertson of Austin. A jury decided a furniture store owed her \$80,000 for a broken ankle she suffered tripping over a toddler running wild in the store.

"The store owners were understandably surprised by the verdict, considering the running toddler was her own son," the e-mail said.

Numbers six through two are more ridiculous. Then comes numero uno.

Winnebago winner?

"This year's runaway First Place Stella Award winner was Mrs. Merv Grazinski, of Oklahoma City, who purchased a new 32-foot Winnebago motor home. On her first trip home, from an OU football game, having driven on to the freeway, she set the cruise control at 70 mph and calmly left the driver's seat to go to the back of the Winnebago to make herself a sandwich.

"Not surprisingly, the motor home left the freeway, crashed and overturned. Also not surprisingly, Mrs. Grazinski sued Winnebago for not putting in the owner's manual that she couldn't actually leave the driver's seat while the cruise control was set.

"The Oklahoma jury awarded her - are you sitting down? - \$1,750,000 plus a new motor home. Winnebago actually changed their manuals as a result of this suit, just in case Mrs. Grazinski has any relatives who might also buy a motor home."

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The e-mail concludes: "Are we, as a society, getting more stupid?"

Guffaws around the world

The answer may well be yes, stupid enough to believe that this sort of nonsense really happens.

My friend was not the only credulous one. A Nexis search for the name "Merv Grazinski" turned up scores of articles, the vast majority buying the Winnebago story as gospel truth.

More than a few are lazy columnists, who were too dazzled by marvelous stories to do even the easiest research to determine whether they were true.

Among outlets falling for the hoax were the New York Daily News, CNN and U.S. News & World Report.

American writers weren't alone in their gullibility. Even more credulous mentions of the daffy Mrs. Grazinski (or Mr. Grazinski in some accounts) appeared in foreign papers.

Readers in Canada, England, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and even Vietnam guffawed at the expense of us stupid Americans.

To its credit, the Austin American-Statesman debunked the story of Ms. Robertson and her toddler several years ago, when the "Stella Awards" started making the rounds.

Los Angeles Times reporter Myron Levin went one better. He called Winnebago.

"Wide acceptance of the myths has been an eye-

opener for Sheila Davis, public relations manager for Winnebago Industries in Forest City, Iowa," he wrote. "Davis says she has repeatedly had to explain that no, there was no Grazinski lawsuit, and, no, the company did not have to change the owner's manual to avoid a swarm of copycat claims."

I'm not saying that frivolous lawsuits don't happen. I've been sued twice in my 40 years in the business.

Once was by a retired cop who was involved in a truck-theft operation. Funny thing was, I didn't even name him in the article.

The other time was by a small-time charity operator who was offended by coverage of his request for a huge government subsidy.

He had a hard time showing damages. Contributions to his anemic treasury had risen modestly in the wake of publicity, apparently because of an increase of name recognition for his organization.

Both suits were tossed by judges.

That is the fate of most frivolous suits. Even ones such as the notorious McDonald's scalding coffee suit are not nearly so silly as they become in manufactured legends.

The Albuquerque jury did award Stella Liebeck, 79, (after whom the "Stellas" are named) almost \$3 million after she spilled coffee on her lap, causing third-degree burns, a week's hospitalization and skin grafts.

But the jury had learned that McDonald's served its coffee much hotter than other restaurants, that it had received more than 700 previous complaints and had paid more than \$500,000 in earlier settlements.

Liebeck originally asked for just \$20,000 to cover her medical bills and other expenses, and that McDonald's serve its coffee at a more moderate temperature. McDonald's offered her \$800.

Shortly before trial, a mediator recommended McDonald's pay \$225,000. The company said no.

Jurors awarded \$160,000 in damages and \$2.7 million in punitives, hoping to change the company's behavior. The judge lowered the punitives to \$480,000, and the case settled for an undisclosed amount, presumably less.

Here's the lesson: The next time an Internet tale makes you think things are even worse than you thought, check it out. Especially when the tale suggests that the American system is stacked against wealthy corporations.

One easy way: [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com), an excellent site that investigates urban myths. It took less than 30 seconds to ask for "Stella Awards" and receive the verdict: "False."

**Trusted journalists from the major media including US News & World Report, CNN, and the NY Daily News, are among the gullible reporters too lazy and dazzled by the sensationalism to bother to check if these tales were true.**

**The false reports were picked up all over the world — one reason why people everywhere think Americans are complete idiots.**

**If you receive one of these viral emails, set the record straight.**