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Small business to candidates: What about us?

By Jose Pagliery @CNMONEY January 12, 2012: 11:30 AM ET



Restaurant owner John Kunkel wants candidates to talk more about the issues affecting small business.

NEW YORK (CNMONEY) -- Republican front runners have debated about a wide range of issues: the economy, jobs and more.

But when it comes to talking about the problems plaguing small businesses, entrepreneurs say the silence is almost deafening.

Restaurant operators, health consultants, manufacturers and many more CNMONEY spoke with say the candidates haven't given their concerns about health care costs, regulation and taxes enough special attention.

"Small businesses in general are not hearing enough for what's going to be done for them in the future," said John Kunkel, founder of 50 Eggs Restaurant Group.

Support for the candidates is spread across the board. Those backing the **front runner, Mitt Romney**, concede his Wall Street perspective is different from their own. But they also note that his business experience could be a plus.

Dave Jacobs, president of Houston-based TechKnowledge Consulting, plans to vote for Romney. His firm, which equips buildings with the latest technology during construction, has been hard hit because of the changes in health care reform.

12 entrepreneurs reinventing health care

In 2008, Jacobs spent many sleepless nights because fears about federal health care changes caused five hospital projects to be put on hold. That forced him to scramble for other deals and plug a \$1 million hole -- half of his company's expected sales that year. He doesn't think Romney's ever experienced such a nightmare, but he excuses that.

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"I doubt the guy's ever stayed awake at night wondering if he's going to make payroll," said Jacobs, who said Romney's experience would at least be better suited for maneuvering through bureaucracy in Washington.

Domonic Biggi, CEO of his family's Beaverton Foods in Beaverton, Ore., said the candidates aren't detailing plans to slow the rising cost of health care. In the last few years, he has had to pay more for benefits, which keeps eating into his 72-person firm's revenue.

"They're just not saying anything that means anything to me," he said. He added that he wants to hear exactly how a candidate will work with insurance companies to lower health care premiums and pass on savings. In the meantime, he is undecided.

Michele Michaelis Slifka, whose company IvySage Education tutors students with graduates from the nation's top universities, **voted for President Barack Obama**. But she has since become disillusioned with his policies.

Still, no Republican candidate has inspired her enough to switch parties and register to vote in New York's closed primaries.

"I've certainly been waiting for an intelligent voice to address the real concerns of small business, to fuel the bottom of the pyramid of economic growth," she said. "Nobody's been precise about articulating solutions."

Health care costs have made Slifka hesitant to take on more full-time staff in New York City than her one project manager.

Robert Livingstone has taken a similar approach in Weston, Fla., where he runs Ideal Cost, a go-between for companies to negotiate lower credit card rates. He's holding back from hiring staff to help him manage 40 contracted brokers across the United States.

"I would hire office personnel as actual employees if I had a firm grasp as to what the payroll taxes would be in the future," he said, condemning Congress for not extending a two-month payroll tax holiday further.

Livingstone supports **U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas** and **former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman**.

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"They let private businesses operate without the fear of overregulation. They have a hands-off approach, which makes an entrepreneurial risk worth taking," he said.

Despite such criticisms, the half dozen candidates do have small business agendas.

Romney intends to issue waivers from the health care law and protect business owners against intellectual property theft from China. Paul has promised to eliminate income and capital gains taxes. And in October he sponsored a bill giving small businesses a six-month grace period to follow federal regulations. Huntsman hopes to reduce the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 25 percent and has offered to do away with the alternative minimum tax, affecting those business owners filing as individuals. **Newt Gingrich** plans to repeal the Dodd-Frank Act, which increases regulation on the financial industry.

In Miami, Kunkel plans to nearly triple the number of his Lime Fresh Mexican Grills in Florida and Alabama to 31 are colliding with worries about health care costs. In 2014, all employers will be forced to provide insurance for their workers or pay a \$2,000 fine for each one who is uninsured. Providing insurance for his 60 partners and executives cost him 6 percent of last year's \$18 million revenue. He expects that to balloon as he rolls out plans for more than 300 hourly employees.

But it's not government health care that bothers him. Kunkel said he supports an option to level the playing field and provide a low-cost service, but he said forcing it on corporations is "a death sentence." He's



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considered Romney's idea of waivers but doesn't think it's enough. It would spare small companies like his but not large ones like restaurant chains, which he plans to rely on for partnerships, he explained. There would also be incentive for him to stay small, he added.

"We don't want to be a small business forever," he said.

The issues are worrying him so much that he intends to register to vote in Florida's closed Republican primaries later this month. He plans to vote for Huntsman but says he still hasn't heard enough from the candidates to be sure of any of them. ■

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