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MANAGE YOUR OWN DESTINY . . . OR SOMEONE ELSE WILL!

Playing the Game of Hardball PR

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As Published in “Lessons Learned in the PR Trenches,” *PR News*
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How many times has the boss or client come to you and said, “Let’s play hardball.” It’s hard to keep from laughing . . . or crying. Let’s see, shall we coerce them with conjunctives? Pummel them with participles?

If someone says something that’s inaccurate, insulting, inane or just irritating, the instinct is to fight back with something that destroys their arguments, and perhaps even punishes them. Right?

Can public relations actually play hardball the way the boss or clients expect? The answer is sometimes “yes,” sometimes “maybe,” but usually “no.” After all, *Public Relations* is usually about relationships, not about winning or losing.

One thing’s for sure, it’s your destiny and only you can manage it the way you or your client want.

Perhaps the most outstanding PR hardball game was played and won by General Motors in 1993 when it discovered that NBC’s *Dateline* used a demonstration that made certain truck model gas tanks explode. An analysis of videotapes indicated the presence of detonators. GM pulled out all the stops, got the facts, did their homework and defeated NBC.

In 1999, Chiquita Brands International Inc. forced the *Cincinnati Enquirer* to run front-page apologies and received more than \$10 million in settlement for a series of 1998 articles on Chiquita’s business practices. The newspaper articles contained information from illegally obtained voice mail messages. The *Enquirer* fired the reporter, who later pleaded guilty to two felony charges of illegally gaining access to Chiquita’s voice-mail system. He went to jail.

Before you start into hardball, here are seven questions to ask the boss to see if you really can play:

1. Is there conclusive evidence that supports a hard, contrary position?
2. Is there a solid legal basis for the hardball position?
3. Is the organization willing to devote the kind of resources, energy and focus necessary? Is the organization willing to expose itself extensively to gather the evidence and information needed to win?
4. What else may be revealed, which could be equally or even more embarrassing, or newsworthy, as a result of this effort? What is the potential collateral damage?
5. What is gained, who wins, what are the benefits of using this approach – beyond good feelings on the executive floor?
6. Could your efforts trigger additional litigation, sanctions, whistle-blowing, or energize critics?
7. Who takes the fall or what is plan B when the approach fails or backfires?

When a boss or client wants to strike back, follow the rules. These are lessons learned the hard way:

1. ***Establish an ongoing internal hardball team*** and staff to activate a process that develops a tough strategy promptly. Waiting even a day can destroy the exceptionally important edge such an effort requires.
2. ***Establish and staff a “war room”*** or “peace room” as you prefer from the moment you begin contemplating this approach. Monitor aggressively, respond promptly, and relentlessly correct and clarify the record.
3. ***Define victory.*** Understand what you’re really after, look at it realistically and dispassionately, and determine in whose best interests it is and what the price will be if it all backfires.
4. ***Get the facts, all of the facts.*** The facts must line up to support your conclusions and subtract from the position of the opponent or antagonist.
5. ***Create a timeline of core events.*** Dig deeper. Find out what really happened, who did what, and what the stakes really are. Someone in your organization knows. Find out.
6. ***Develop conclusive direct evidence.*** To challenge the media, your critics, or prosecutors, direct evidence works.

7. **Ask the tough questions** of yourself first, and then begin shaping the questions to ask to position your opponent.
8. **Build your case systematically and methodically.** Use positive, declarative language. Home runs are rare in the hardball PR game, but powerful, incremental victories of various sizes and magnitudes are clearly possible. Negative language only prolongs arguments and postpones victory.
9. **Prepare to let the legal department take the lead.** Most successful hardball PR models have heavy involvement from the legal department or legal counsel.

Playing hardball is the toughest kind of PR to actually achieve. While it seems so appropriate in many situations, rarely do the facts line up to conclusively support the use of this technique.

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