

Food Lion PR turnaround a textbook case

Charlotte Business Journal - January 31, 1997

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To make its case against Capital Cities/ABC Inc. in the public's eye as much as in court, [Food Lion Stores Inc.](#) created a communications juggernaut for its six-week trial against the network, even hiring a Los Angeles public relations agency that has worked with such high-profile clients as Kim Bassinger.

The use of Sitrick & Co., which PR industry experts estimate could have cost the Salisbury-based grocer up to \$300 an hour, is the most visible example of what Food Lion learned from its much-criticized reaction to the 1992 PrimeTime Live show that accused it of improper food handling.

Then, the fast-growing chain, led by Chairman Tom Smith, reacted angrily, attacking the media and doing little to tell its side of the story. Food Lion didn't just learn its lesson, industry experts say, it created a textbook case for proactive corporate communications.

Food Lion and Sitrick executives spent months developing the strategy to disseminate information to the media and public. An office was set up in Greensboro, the site of the federal trial, with a copier, fax machine and phones and computers to handle media inquiries. Faxes were sent daily to hundreds of news organizations and a Web site provided trial updates and background information. The staff in Greensboro carried cellular phones, beepers and laptops to stay on top of the trial and media questions.

Dulcie Straughan, a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill assistant professor who specializes in public relations, says Food Lion made a mistake in 1992 that many companies make: They were caught off guard.

And its initial reaction of "let's close the gates and not let them in" was natural, but the worst reaction a company can have, Straughan says. "If I were a reporter, I would immediately become suspicious."

Food Lion communications manager Chris Ahearn knew when she came to the company in March 1995, the trial was going to be a major undertaking.

"This is certainly the largest case I've dealt with," Ahearn says. "Certainly the highest profile."

The trial was expected to have lasting implications on investigative journalism, something reporters weren't going to take lightly.

As the trial approached, Ahearn says she and the Food Lion lawyers realized the company's three-person public relations department couldn't churn out the information it was going to take to combat ABC. The company's lawyer's hooked Food Lion up with Sitrick and two staff members with the firm began working with Food Lion last fall. They read newspaper clips and viewed hours of videotape.

"Capital Cities/ABC has one of the largest public relations departments in the country," says Donna Walters, Sitrick vice president. "Food Lion runs a lean program."

Walters moved to North Carolina from Los Angeles for the trial. Anne George came from Sitrick's New York office to assist. Other members of Sitrick's staff served as back-up from the Los Angeles office.

Walters says their plan was to get as much information out as possible. They returned every phone call, fielding questions from 20 to 30 reporters per day. They sometimes released two to three updates a day. They surfed the Internet and tracked down experts who could comment on issues in the trial. They produced a video to distribute to reporters showing ABC's video footage not used in the broadcast. They often worked past midnight and every weekend. They generated enough information that they carted off at least 20 boxes of files when the trial ended.

Ahearn and her staff also provided daily updates to Food Lion employees through the company's e-mail, bulletin boards and newsletter.

Walters and Ahearn won't say how much the public relations campaign cost.

Tim Barber, a lawyer with Womble, Carlyle, Sandridge & Rice who helped try the case for Food Lion, says the PR campaign was important during the trial. It allowed the lawyers to focus on their work, rather than media questions.

"I've never dealt with a case that got that much publicity," Barber says. "I think it was important to Food Lion to get the truth out everyday. ABC was in its element."

UNC's Straughan says it appears that Food Lion learned from its mistakes.

"It sounds like to me Food Lion has gotten some good advice," Straughan says.

Ahearn, who came to Food Lion from Fleming Foods in Oklahoma City, says she didn't consider Food Lion's initial response to the PrimeTime Live story.

"In '92, the company was in shock," Ahearn says. "It never believed a news organization would do what ABC did."

Since the trial ended and the jury decided ABC must pay Food Lion \$5.5 million in punitive damages, Ahearn has been making the rounds on radio talk shows and doing interviews for reporters. ABC has said it will appeal. Ahearn says Food Lion will wait and see what happens and keep Setrick in mind if ABC turns up the heat.

"We've been pleased," Ahearn says. "I know Food Lion certainly realizes the importance of good, quality information."