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The spin doctor will see you now

If you've got a public relations problem, Michael Sitrick is the problem solver

By Lisa Ferguson
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You could call Michael Sitrick a master of disaster.

But rather than wreaking havoc, the public relations wizard from Los Angeles often works in disaster's wake to redirect any resulting negative information before -- or shortly after -- media bloodhounds get their paws on it.

"What a spin doctor does," Sitrick writes in his recently published book, "Spin: Turning the Power of the Press to Your Advantage" (Regnery Publishing, \$24.95), "is figure out a way to get (a story) to go where he'd like it to go -- or at least get it to lose interest in going where he'd rather it not poke its nose."

Sitrick, a former TV, radio and newspaper reporter and speech writer for Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, has "spun" stories during some of the most highly publicized crises in the country for some of the biggest names and corporations in the business and entertainment worlds, including: Kim Basinger, Kelsey Grammer, Don King, Barneys New York department stores and Wickes companies.

After years of interviewing other people who practice "strategic public relations," Sitrick says he and his co-author, former Newsweek senior editor Allan Mayer, penned the book to explain to college graduates, among others, that the oft-misunderstood public relations business is "a lot more than looking good in an Armani suit or a sweater.

"This is a business about doing your homework; this is a business about strategic thinking, and whether it's product publicity or crisis work, your client expects and deserves a lot more than the perfunctory issuing of press releases."

But green grads aren't the only ones scratching their heads: Sitrick says most people are uncertain of what purpose a public relations specialist serves -- and, for that matter, don't figure they'll ever need one.

Think again. In today's information-gulping society, more and more average Joes are ending up on the front pages of national newspapers and as the topic of nightly newscasts.

"Even an average individual can get involved in a lawsuit where all of a sudden they find themselves in the glare of the media's headlights," Sitrick says. "How do you react? What do you do? What do you say? What's the reporter thinking?"

More often, it's celebrities and corporate moguls who need help answering these questions. "Just the way you wouldn't expect to go into a court of law and argue your own case, you wouldn't expect to go to the court of (public) opinion and argue your own case.

"We work very much the way a trial lawyer does," Sitrick, president of Sitrick and Company, Inc., explains. "We gather evidence, we put it together in a cohesive fashion and then we present it in a way which, hopefully, will persuade the judge -- in our case, the reporter -- to write a story that presents our point of view. Fortunately, like a good trial lawyer, we're more successful than not.

Just the facts

One of those successes came in 1992, when Sitrick and his company were called to help clear majority MGM Grand Inc. shareholder Kirk Kerkorian's name in his legal battle with the French bank, Credit Lyonnais.

Kerkorian was sued that year for more than \$1 billion by the bank which claimed that he had misrepresented the financial well-being of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, Inc., when he sold the film studio to Giancarlo Parretti, an allegedly shady Italian businessman, in 1990.

Credit Lyonnais had loaned Kerkorian the money to finance the purchase of the studio and when the new owner fell behind on the payments, the bank foreclosed on the loan, took control of the studio and blamed Kerkorian for the debacle.

Upon learning of the lawsuit, Sitrick called MGM Grand President Alex Yemenidjian. In the book, he recalls: "I told him that, in my opinion, unless Kerkorian made a concerted effort to get the word out, he was bound to be unfairly portrayed as the villain of this story."

Sitrick was invited to a strategy session with Kerkorian and his advisors. In the days following, Kerkorian filed a countersuit -- charging that the bank had exaggerated Parretti's resources in order to make the MGM sale happen -- and Sitrick got to work.

"What we try to do in situations like that is we get the facts out," he says. "We believed then, as the facts ended up showing, that Kirk Kerkorian was not the villain here as originally portrayed, but really the victim." (In 1994, a California judge tossed out Credit Lyonnaiss' suit, and the case was settled confidentially the following year.)

Though he is "contractually prohibited" from speaking about the case, Yemenidjian says Sitrick "did the best that could have been done under the circumstances.

"Michael is one of the most astute public relations executives I have ever met," he says. "He is very aggressive, he is very focused, he's very well-connected and he thinks through the ramifications of any PR activity, or lack thereof, quicker than anybody I've ever seen.

"He is a relentless, irrepressible fighter and he has a tremendous amount of pride that I don't think you find in the average public relations executive."

Kerkorian's experience, Sitrick says, is "illustrative of how misinformation is out there. You can correct it by presentation of the facts."

On the other hand, "by just putting those facts out there," he says, "you're rolling the dice that the reporter or the person being given these facts will understand the significance of them and what they mean."

In Lion's den

That's a situation Sitrick, 51, encountered when he was brought in to squelch the rumor mill birthed when Orange County, Calif., filed for bankruptcy protection in 1994.

Within weeks of the announcement, Sitrick and his crew conducted a computer search and found some 5,200 news articles had been written about the county's financial woes.

"The bigger problem, however, was not the number," he says, "but the fact that there were people who were put on that (story) to cover a financial issue who didn't know the difference between a balance sheet and a bed sheet," he says.

"So not only did you have to answer the (media) inquiries ... you had to give a significant number of the reporters a course in Finance 101. You want to make sure that the information is reported accurately in order to make sure that the reporter who you're talking with understands what you're saying."

Or, in the case of the Food Lion supermarket chain -- which was the subject of a highly publicized, hidden camera investigation in 1992 by ABC's "Prime Time Live" -- what you're seeing.

The report, which alleged that the chain sold spoiled meat and poultry, sickened viewers and resulted in the closure of 88 Food Lion stores. The company sued ABC for fraud and trespassing. Sitrick's company began spinning its PR wheels for them prior to the 1996 trial.

By obtaining, through subpoena, "Prime Time Live's" outtakes -- film of the Food Lion investigation that had landed on the cutting room floor -- Sitrick and his crew were able to demonstrate how the broadcast "had misrepresented what the facts of the situation were."

Among them: Scenes of an employee whom viewers were led to believe had cooked chicken to be sold at a store, despite her qualms that it was rotten.

What wasn't shown during the television broadcast, Sitrick says, was the employee telling the store manager that the poultry didn't smell right and throwing it away.

"By showing examples of this," Sitrick says, "we would say to the reporters, 'Would your editor let you do that (cut out large portions of a story)? Do you think this is right?' And we were able to turn the tide." (A jury last year fined ABC \$5.5 million for its questionable reporting tactics in the Food Lion investigation.)

"What the outtakes made clear, it seemed to me," Sitrick writes, "was that the issue here wasn't investigative journalism, it was honesty in journalism."

Package makes perfect

Putting a proper spin on things is a "part of daily existence" for politicians, according to Howard Kurtz, media reporter for the Washington Post and author of "Spin Cycle" (Free Press), which has spent two months on the New York Times' bestseller list.

"You always have to be either selling yourself and your policies to reporters or playing defense when someone else is beating up on you," Kurtz explains.

"You have to package what you do in such a way that you not only boost yourself, but grab some ink or air time for what you are doing. It's a very crowded media world out there and part of spin is just to break through the static."

Couple all of this with what Kurtz says is the press' own spin. "All of which," Kurtz says, "makes this kind of dizzying for the general public to follow."

Not all of Sitrick's clients (whose fees are kept "confidential") are mired in controversy. He estimates that more than half of his practice is dedicated to handling "the normal stuff, the more traditional corporate strategic public relations.

"It's just that when you represent a Food Lion against ABC or an Orange County in its bankruptcy, the media tends to think that's more interesting than representing a company that has a non-invasive heart scan, which is a phenomenal client ... but doesn't have the sex appeal from the media standpoint of solving a crisis."

Sometimes, when it comes to public relations, the less the public sees of Sitrick and his employees, the better.

"You know what a lawyer does in court, but a lot of what we do is under the radar screen," he says. "We may be involved in a story where we are the main source (of information) of that story ... yet we or our client is quoted as saying, 'No comment.' Of course, that's exactly what you want to do.

"If there's a little bit of this black magic overhang to the profession, that's OK with me. My clients know what I do."