

WORKING WITH MEDIA

When image, truth wrestle, it's bad for the executive

By Calvin Naito

It's riveting: The president of the United States and the media appear to be engaged in an intense wrestling match that has effects on all of our lives.

The reality is it's just another example of the timeless wrestling match between image and truth.

This is what happens when government officials, business executives and others seek to increase their power and influence. The person in a position of authority seeks to shape their image by controlling their organization's communications with their stakeholders and the general public. Working with the authority figure in this effort is their top PR/communications officer or press secretary and associated staff.

The more that the official tries to falsely shape image at the expense of the truth, the more intense the wrestling match will become. The mainstream media, with its inquisitive and investigative nature, is focused on reporting the truth in the public interest. The media can be seen metaphorically as the truth.

The fundamental reality in today's technological and multimedia world is that the path to greater power and influence involves working truthfully and skillfully with the media. Many people find this hard to believe, as many executives in business and government are afraid of the press, have little understanding of it, and often hold the media in contempt.

The most influential people in the world are the best communicators. We are in a media-driven age with a multitude of platforms, and the individuals who gain influence know how to get their messages out via these media platforms. They understand the power of the media. They understand that the media is the best friend they can have.

How do you establish and maintain positive relations with the media?

The CEO or official should follow these basic guidelines: Be honest but discreet (you don't have to tell them everything, but everything you tell

them must be true). Hustle for them, and get back to reporters as soon as you can. Write clearly and give them information that is useful and accurate. Help them sort out and visualize the story. And most important of all: Maintain a healthy attitude toward the press.

Exercising leadership is hard, and effectively engaging the media requires a repertoire of skills. Either the official must possess them, develop them, employ others (staff or consultants) who have the valuable skills, or the official must function via a combination of these. The challenge of the official and his team is to make sure that their stories make the news in an informative and entertaining way. They need to find ways to cut through the clutter and noise and ensure that their story is seen and heard.

The executive must create a setting that allows the communications officer to tell him the truth. The CEO must make it safe for the communications officer to tell him what he needs to know, not intimidate the communications officer into insincerely telling the official what he wants to hear. Conversely, though, the communications officer or press secretary must be committed to speaking truth to power and explicitly make clear to the official that they are prepared to resign or be fired if asked to lie or engage in a cover-up.

The official or CEO should let his or her PR/communications officer continuously audit the organization's operations and actively identify shortcomings in business plans, policy proposals, workplace practices and personal conduct. In some ways, these advisers are the first reporters on the scene, and they can advise the CEO and the management team to correct shortcomings and deficiencies before engaging with the real reporters.

The official must have the calmness and maturity to listen to their recommendations, without irrationally killing the messenger.

In the public arena, when image and truth are different, they will continue to wrestle, with usually bad consequences for the government official (including the president of the United States) or business executive. When image and truth are not different, the two will morph into identical twins and become a powerful duo. When image and truth stop wrestling and instead become one, you come out on top.

Calvin Naito is a strategic communications professional based in Los Angeles.