



Gotcha!

By preempting *20/20* on the Internet, p.r. man Mike Sitrick didn't just get better spin for his client. He took the war against the media into a new dimension.

BY SETH LUBOVE

THE CREW FROM THE TELEVISION newsmagazine is banging on your door. You can have the security guard throw them out and know that they'll trash you for ducking an interview. Or you can sit down with them and figure that of the hour you give them, they'll use only 40 seconds on air. And those 40 seconds will make you look very guilty.

Better solution: Call Los Angeles flack Michael Sitrick. He'll turn the tables on the newshounds. Sitrick is the guy who posted on the Internet the full video of a contentious interview of his besieged client, diet-pill maker Metabolife Inter-

national, by ABC's *20/20*—before *20/20* had a chance to air it. For Sitrick, 52, it was the latest in a long string of strong-arm tactics that have won him notice and a roomful of clients willing to pay him \$450 an hour.

Anybody in Metabolife's spot will try to spin or even kill a story before it's aired or published. But by using the Internet, Sitrick has taken advantage of a direct, unfiltered medium for reaching potentially millions of open minds. Sitrick's move—which included a full-page ad in the *New York Times* inviting traffic to the Web site—has landed him and San Diego-based Metabolife in the

Broadcast blues: Sitrick and a new breed of hardball flacks want reporters to share in the pain.

major press and on the various chatter and buzz circuits of the wired world.

It was a calculated bet that by posting Metabolife's clash with *20/20* on the Internet, the company wouldn't hurt its case by drawing yet more attention to a story that otherwise would have escaped most people. That's a bet that Robert Dilenschneider, the former chief executive officer of Hill & Knowlton and famed flack for his own impressive rogues' gallery of clients, wouldn't have made. "By responding in advance, you're building an audience for the program," Dilenschneider says. "Why call attention to some-

thing that's going to be negative?"

But it's a battle out there in the war for public opinion, and more companies are turning to the new breed of hardball players or, as in a recent use of the Internet by Philip Morris USA, finding their own ways to balance negative press. It's not enough just to seek redress in court afterward. The recent overturning of Food Lion's fraud case against ABC's *PrimeTime Live* further reinforces what most businesses knew already: Don't count on getting justice after the fact.

Sitrick should know: He was also the mastermind behind taking selective outtakes from the *PrimeTime Live* report and repackaging them into a slick videotape that purported to show how the ABC producers were mischaracterizing many of the hidden camera incidents of unsanitary conditions in Food

Lion's stores. At the time, in 1997, he only sent out the outtakes tape to selected reporters as evidence of ABC's alleged deceit; today he says he wouldn't hesitate to go straight to the Internet.

Eric Dezenhall runs a 30-person "crisis communications" firm in Washington, D.C. that unabashedly hires private detectives to smoke out his clients' critics, including one supposed grassroots agitator who was popping up in stories bashing a client's food additive. In fact, he was a front for a competitor.

"In past years, the rule of thumb was, 'Never piss off the media,'" snarls Dezenhall, author of a new book called *Nail 'Em!* about torching irresponsible press reports. "This is classic public relations b.s. It assumes you have a future with the media that is attacking you. You don't.... There won't be any future if the

TV show buries you."

Forget defense, in other words; go on the offensive. If some reporter has it in his head that you make defective gas tanks or your factory is poisoning the lake, don't settle for "damage control."

When Dezenhall's firm was working for the folksy Motel 6 chain in 1995, the company got a call from Geraldo Rivera's old tabloid show: Give us a spokesman within 48 hours for a piece we're broadcasting about a couple who were peeped on by motel workers while having sex. The show had already produced the lead-in spot with the couple; it just needed the corporate sucker for the dramatic televised showdown.

Dezenhall bought a little bit of time by having lawyers fire off a threatening letter. Then the dirty work began. A team of forensic investigators tore apart

The Flack for When You're Under Attack

A small sampling of Mike Sitrick's most celebrated clients runs from the profligate to the profane. In some cases, such as Los Angeles billionaires Marvin Davis and Gary Winnick, Sitrick acts as public relations consigliere. Other times, such as with clothier Barneys, he parachutes in to handle a breaking crisis. It still costs the defended \$450 an hour either way.



KIM BASINGER
During Chapter 11

APOLLO ADVISORS
Leon Black

BARNEYS NEW YORK
Chapter 11

KIM BASINGER
Chapter 11

BURBANK AIRPORT
In terminal expansion battle

CIRCLE K CORP.
Chapter 11

COMPUTER LEARNING CENTER

MARVIN DAVIS

ROY DISNEY
Shamrock Holdings



EL TORITO
"Frog-in-a-taco" incident

EXECUTIVE LIFE INSURANCE
When Leon Black was battling to purchase assets

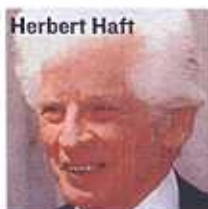
EXXON CORP.
In aftermath of Valdez spill

MRS. FIELDS INC.
During out-of-court restructuring

FOOD LION
Vs. ABC *PrimeTime Live*

FRANKLIN MINT
In Princess Diana matter and beyond

GILLETTE HOLDINGS
Chapter 11—including Vail Associates



GREYHOUND LINES, INC.
During Chapter 11 in aftermath of labor issues

HERBERT HAFT
In dispute with son Ronald

HAWAIIAN AIRLINES
During Chapter 11

LJ HOOKER CORP.
Chapter 11

RD HUBBARD
In takeover of Hollywood Park

HUNT BROTHERS LIQUIDATING TRUST

LEE IACOCCA

ICM
Talent agency—in dispute between Jeffrey Berg and Michael Ovitz

ILLINOIS POWER



KIRK KERKORIAN

DON KING

L.A. KINGS

PIERCE MARSHALL
Oil heir fends off pinup queen Anna Nicole Smith

WENDY McCRAW
Wife of Craig McCaw

NATIONAL MEDICAL ENTERPRISES
Raided by FBI—now Tenet Healthcare

ORANGE COUNTY, CALIF.
Chapter 11

JB OXFORD & CO.
Litany of matters, including FBI raid

GARY WINNICK

the walls in the room where the couple had stayed. Their conclusion: The "peephole" didn't go through the wall.

Meanwhile, Dezenhall's private dicks discovered that the couple were bunco artists with rap sheets for prior extortion schemes. The Geraldo exposé on Motel 6 quietly went away.

Tension between business or celebrated figures and the media has been building for years (see box). Many others have tried variations of Sitrick's approach, though of course without the Internet at their disposal.

While head of corporate communications for Nissan North America in 1990, Donald Spetner received the *60 Minutes* call dreaded by all corporate flacks. "We'd like to come out with Ed Bradley next week and interview you about charges of sudden acceleration in the Nissan 280ZX and 300ZX," Spetner recalls the producer saying.

Where did *60 Minutes* get the story? Nissan was pretty sure it knew. The car company was suing a former employee for embezzlement. The employee had responded two months earlier with a letter threatening that if Nissan didn't back off, he would go to the networks with revelations about a scheme at Nissan to cover up safety defects.

Spetner had to scramble to stall the story, which could have beaten up Nissan the same way earlier stories about sudden acceleration caused years of grief for Audi. The company dashed off letters to CBS asking, in part, if *60 Minutes* had interviewed the embezzler. "We were going to taint everything he touched," says Spetner.

The reply: CBS doesn't reveal the names of sources whose interviews are not part of a broadcast. "We're going ahead, the network said. "We're starting to panic," Spetner recalls. He turned to the *Wall Street Journal's* Detroit bureau, promising the newspaper an exclusive on the embezzlement and blackmail scheme if the paper would run its story before *60 Minutes* could air its report. In the meantime, Spetner prepared a massive counterattack media campaign.

"We could have survived a story about a guy who embezzled money, but

Best Defense = Great Offense

Targets of negative stories can get tips as far back as Edward Bernays. By the 1930s the "Father of Spin" helped clients like American Tobacco avert bad publicity. His strategy: Set the agenda early and aggressively. It has served students like Michael Sitrick well as bouts with the media have intensified in recent decades:

ILLINOIS POWER VS. CBS, 1979

IP's purportedly mismanaged nuclear reactor attracted a *60 Minutes* investigation. IP cooperated, but videotaped the crew filming on site. When the segment aired only 2 minutes of a 90-minute executive interview, IP rebutted with its own ticking-stop-watch program, dinging the show's reputation.

WESTMORELAND VS. CBS, 1982

Debate swirled over a documentary suggesting former Vietnam commander William Westmoreland had understated the enemy's strength to make it appear that the U.S. was winning the war. The general stirred up enough dust to inspire a *TV Guide* cover alleging CBS skewed reporting.



CINCINNATI BELL VS. CBS, 1988

Two disgruntled former employees alleged that the phone company had illegally wiretapped corporations and politicians, even President Ford at a Cincinnati hotel. Like Illinois Power, the Bell taped the *60 Minutes* interview—but then showed its chief executive rebutting the charges six days ahead of the broadcast. By Sunday the charges had grown cold.

GENERAL MOTORS VS. NBC, 1992

Dateline NBC's damning segment on the "side-saddle" gas-tank design of a GM pickup truck blew up on the network. That program didn't tell viewers about small rockets it planted near the tank to help a crash-blast along. After dramatic truck-on-fire footage, GM cried foul and sued. The smoking rockets forced NBC into an on-air retraction.



PHILIP MORRIS VS. ABC, 1994

Day One newsmagazine alleged that tobacco companies "spiked" their cigarettes with nicotine to make them more addictive. Philip Morris responded with a \$10 billion defamation suit—the day before the FDA commissioner was to testify on whether cigarettes should be regulated as a drug. The parties settled the next year; ABC covered PM's legal fees and apologized on air.

TIGER MANAGEMENT VS. MCGRAW-HILL, 1996

Business Week cover story detailed the alleged downfall of hedge-fund titan Julian Robertson. He sued for \$1 billion and went on to have a banner year in 1997. In December the parties settled—no money exchanged hands, but the magazine apologized in print for saying Robertson's "glory days were over." —BRETT NELSON

would have had difficulty sustaining a major story that called into question the safety of our products," Spetner says.

Fortunately for Spetner, now vice president of corporate communications for AIG's SunAmerica unit, the stalling worked. By the time Nissan confirmed in depositions that the blackmailer was peddling bogus information, the Gulf war broke out, further delaying the story. Over a year later, after Nissan got a judgment against the guy and won a separate product liability lawsuit over sudden acceleration, *60 Minutes* quietly let the story die. Despite doing its own reporting, the *Journal* did, too, burying the entire tale.

Sniffs *60 Minutes'* flack, "It probably wasn't good enough to put on the air."

Back in the newsroom, the press is feeling the heat. "Holy moly!" *20/20* seg-

connection with something called the Slim-Fast Nutrition Institute, an affiliate of one of Metabolife's competitors. When he learned that *20/20* would cite Food & Drug Administration reports of deaths and health risks of a primary ingredient in Metabolife's hottest-selling product, he whipped out a General Accounting Office study that questions the reliability of the reports. Sitrick's lead associate on the case, Tony Knight, even deluged Van Horn with a carton of mouse and rat electrocardiograms.

By the time *20/20* showed up in San Diego with correspondent Arnold Diaz, Sitrick made sure that his own camera taped the 70-minute interview with Metabolife's 46-year-old founder, Michael Ellis. It was staged before an auditorium full of fawning company employees.

This isn't the way television re-

"If you come at me with a fist, I'm going to hit you back with a brick," is the mantra of his self-celebrating memoir.

ment producer Mary Van Horn recalls thinking to herself when a *Wall Street Journal* reporter called after being tipped off by Sitrick to the Metabolife Internet scheme. Van Horn and ABC lawyer Elizabeth Schorr didn't want to exhaust *FORBES* with Sitrick's voluminous beefs, but they maintain his pugnacious tactics didn't influence the outcome of the Metabolife story. Van Horn says many of Sitrick's rants are "untrue or misstated, and I found that to be the case quite often while working with him."

Sitrick's usual technique is to wear down reporters and cast doubt in their minds about sources and documents. If that fails, an attorney's letter may be sent along to the media outlet.

"If you come at me with a fist, I'm going to hit you back with a brick," Sitrick snorts in his 1998 self-promoting memoir *Spin* (Regnery Publishing).

When *20/20* unearthed a doctor willing to knock Metabolife on camera, Sitrick's team found out and hounded producer Van Horn about the doctor's

porters want to conduct their interviews. But it would have been awkward for *20/20* to refuse to go along—and then try to tell viewers that Metabolife had declined to appear before a camera.

Did Sitrick's ground-breaking Web move have any effect on the final story? ABC's Van Horn and Schorr insist no.

"We don't need Michael Sitrick to tell ABC News how to report a fair and accurate story," says Schorr, frequently interrupting a phone conversation to lawyer up a *20/20* report on the dangers of cell phones. "The producers were talking to people with different viewpoints throughout this process."

The *20/20* piece ended up hitting the highlights of the Metabolife controversy, including founder Ellis' arrest record, the fierce debate in the medical community and the requisite suffering victim (who's suing, of course). But at the end of the Friday night segment, Sitrick could jump up from his sofa and exult, "Yes! It's exactly what I wanted."

At least, that's his spin on the story. **F**