

# PR WEEK

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Quote of the Week



**You can teach a journalist about communication, but you can't teach a PR pro about news.**

**Michael Sitrick, chairman and CEO of Sitrick & Company, explains his philosophy of hiring from outside the agency merry-go-round. Page 14**

## ANALYSIS

PROFILE

# Sitrick: the PR godfather with a typewriter

Tough as a trial lawyer, the CEO of Sitrick & Company takes no prisoners when it comes to winning journalists to his clients' agendas. Adam Leyland has a face-to-face with this most aggressive pro

It's not the Armani suits or the art-filled offices in Century City, L.A., that single out Michael Sitrick as a sharp shooter. It's the deep-voiced, sub-machine-gun-like patter that rattles off give-it-to-you-straight opinions and weighed-up-every-option ideas at a speed with which one struggles to keep up.

As tough and impregnable as a rock, the president of financial and crisis firm Sitrick & Company will hit you with a smart answer to everything. He simply can't be beat or admit he's wrong. And even if he appears to be on fairly shaky ground, at the very least, you can be sure he will overwhelm you with a volley of facts and figures that takes you energetically off the scent (and leaves you breathless with admiration).

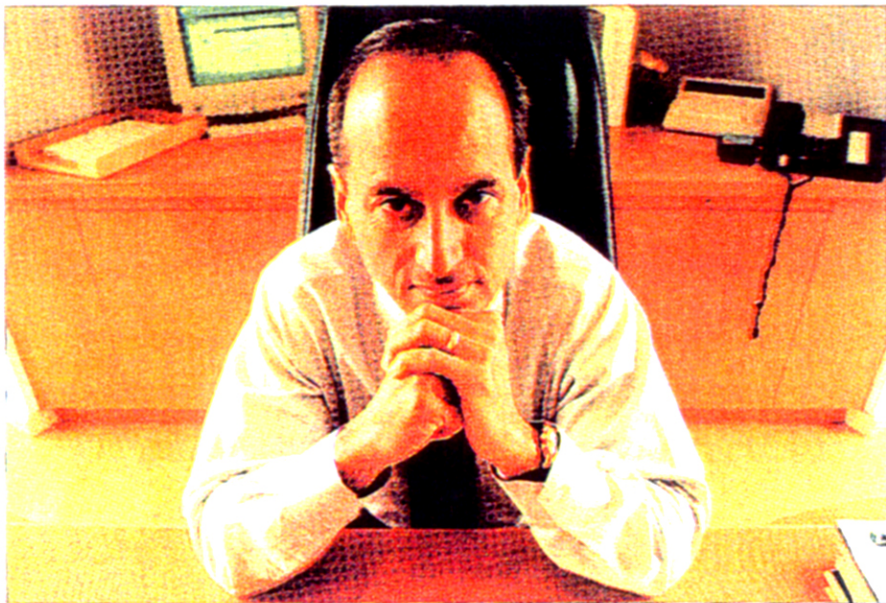
It's this speed of thought, combined with exhaustive research and close attention to detail, on which Sitrick has built his firm's reputation. He thinks and talks like a lawyer — an Alan Dershowitz — and he even acts like one.

"We work very much like trial lawyers," he says. "We gather evidence, we put it 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."

### Aggressive

But it's also his aggressive nature that makes Sitrick such an unusual figure in the PR world.

Perhaps it's his background, brought up on the South Side of Chicago. Or his protective nature, as the eldest of three brothers (both of whom are lawyers). Or the significance of these factors could be overstated and he's just plain hungry and ambitious: his father was a "turn-around guy" for radio and TV stations, ending up in an ad agency whose clients include the Chicago Cubs, in whom his father still retains a stake to this day.



Mean streak...and even reporters (and their children, too) can get blacklisted if they get on Sitrick's bad side

Either way, he has a mean streak that has seen him described by client Dennis Holt, chairman and CEO of Western International Media, as "the godfather with connections and a typewriter." And says Alex Yemendjian, MGM Grand president (and another client): "He is very aggressive, very focused, very well-connected and he thinks through the ramifications of any PR activity, or lack thereof, quicker than anybody I've ever seen."

Much of his counsel is based on the long-known public relations axiom of truth telling. "We're structured as a law firm. We hold ourselves up to high ethical standards. We don't take every client, and we've resigned them in the past because we've not felt comfortable," he states.

Where his counsel might differ from a lawyer, however, is in the communication he advises. "If the truth is bad, that's when you have to communicate what you're doing about it. You need to get journalists to focus on the plans you're taking to ensure it

**MICHAEL SITRICK**  
Chairman and CEO  
Sitrick and Company

1970  
Assistant director of public information  
Mayor Richard Daley, Chicago

1974  
VP, communications and government affairs, National Can Corporation

1981  
SVP, communications  
Wickes Companies

1989  
Founds Sitrick & Company

doesn't happen again." As he demonstrates in his popular book, *Spin, How to Turn the Power of the Press to your Advantage*, Sitrick is a canny manipulator of both journalists and the media process. He has the ability to steer the frenzied media

herd into different directions.

But as Sitrick plays it, truth can be quite painful for those who get on his bad side. In his book, he talks of putting people who are attacking his clients under "the wheel of pain" when they need to be taught a lesson. "In the most extreme case, you're going to make sure that not only the target's business associates become aware of the charges, but also his spouse, his children and his minister."

He's also not afraid to attack writers. "Our religion is to serve the client. How many PR people are afraid to tell journalists they're wrong? That can't be right. You have an obligation or you're not serving the client."

He even admits to blacklisting journalists who don't see it his way. "If a journalist treats us badly, we make sure they know about it. Sometimes that means putting pressure to get an apology. Sometimes we might take an ad. Sometimes, we simply stop dealing with that newspaper altogether. Eventually, the editor-in-chief asks why they're not getting exclusives

from us, and we tell them."

This aggressive fighting quality may be uncomfortable for some PR pros. But it is certainly appreciated by his clients. Sitrick & Company has grown exponentially since its founding in 1989, even by the PR industry's standards. Though he refuses to divulge figures, he claims that fee income was up 50% in 1998, and he estimates 30% to 35% growth this year. Only one factor reins in the firm's growth: the lack of quality staff. "We'd be up 50% this year if I could find the people," he says. The firm now has 40 professionals.

Sitrick makes it company policy to employ only journalists. "You can teach a journalist about communication, but you can't teach a PR pro about news," he explains, as he proudly reels off the names of top journalists he has "persuaded" to switch sides, as well as the media they've worked at — ABC, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Business Week*.

### Electric mind

Sitrick is also resolutely sticking to his guns in terms of expertise: investor relations (particularly transactional deals) and crisis work (mostly bankruptcies). "I don't want to get so big that we get pockets of excellence," he says. "His mind is too electrified to deal with something as simple as putting together a media list," adds a colleague.

But Sitrick has not lost his ambition. He has resisted efforts by many leading agencies to buy him up. And while most of the expansion has been organic, through word of mouth (and Sitrick's mastery in self-promotion), he is not averse to acquisitions and wishes he had more time. After an aborted merger with New York IR firm Krantz & Co. in the early 1990s, his latest acquisition — Washington, DC-based Loving Associates — led by former *Fortune* associate editor Rush Loving, brings him a staff of four. "Access to the Capitol is nice, but the main motivation was finding someone of Loving's caliber," Sitrick explains.

Next on the agenda: a Moscow office. "We're proceeding cautiously but we're confident," he says. Well, why not? If anyone needs crisis counseling, it's the Russians.