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“Putting It on the Line”

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*Are you sure you wanted **me** to speak tonight?*

Because for someone who’s supposed to be a wiz at PR, you might say my personal image management leaves something to be desired.

Here’s what I’m referring to:

*About 2 months ago, *The New York Post* declared, “Beth Comstock's tumultuous two years at NBC Universal are nearing an end...The \$600 million purchase of iVillage... was championed by Comstock and - despite recent momentum - is largely viewed as an overpriced bust.”*

Here’s an anonymous quote, obviously from one of my best friends. It comes from *Page Six*, but has now been well circulated in the blogosphere.

"She's lethal. She could take out your kidney, and you wouldn't know it was gone."

Frankly, I’ve come to love that one.

So while my background in PR maybe hasn’t served me so well in dealing with tabloids and bloggers, it’s given me thick skin.

And my trip through the blogosphere raises some questions: How can we manage in this world of viral chatter? Is anyone immune?

The answer: Not really. People are manipulating these outlets to their own ends, sometimes just for the sheer fun of it...with little to no filtering. And little or no control.

In my early PR days, I often wrapped myself in a shield called “control” – enrobed in an illusion, or rather delusion – that I could actually command an outcome.

After all, that’s what we attempt to do as good communicators, right?

“Control the message,” “shape media outcome,” “direct stakeholder’s actions.”

Is there anyone here who hasn't spent a sleepless night anticipating the next day's big story?

Having quite confidently told our boss or our client we knew the outcome...

And then living in fear of being fired the next morning for not delivering what we had promised.

I've been fired in my imagination at least a couple of hundred times.

But face it, there is little control. Maybe there never really was, but especially not now.

We have to live with the fact that our digital world is built on an odd mixture of transparency and conspiracy, where all kinds of stakeholders vie for control.

And they have the ability to get their messages out with a volume and frequency on a par with established media.

I remember when I first worked as a publicist for NBC News more than 20 years ago.

In those days the late Jack Carmody of the Washington Post was THE definitive source on the inner workings of the media.

News presidents, anchors and publicists alike worked hard for his nod of recognition. To be written about by "Captain Airwaves" meant you'd made it. Jack was a kingmaker with a well-earned journalist pedigree.

Today you can point to Brian Stelter who started his career a few years ago as a 19-year-old blogger working from his parent's house. Wielding his computer and a passion for television, he created the TVNewser blog and quickly built an impressive sphere of influence. (By the way – Brian now works for the *New York Times*.)

A clear example of how digital technology has become the great equalizer.

And more power to Brian and others like him. All of us are trying to make our way through the tumultuous digital age.

And it isn't easy, because so much digital media is not yet sorted out.

Those trying to "control the message" need to give it up – or at least be willing to share control.

As consumers are more deeply engaged, they want more control...sometimes even of the story itself ... or at the very least to feel they can participate in it's unfolding.

You can fight this ... or use it to your advantage.

So while I started out my PR journey believing it's all about control, I've learned that you have to give it up if you're going to move things forward.

That's how you navigate in a world of change.

When I returned to NBC in late 2005, I found an industry fighting change on many levels, especially in the face of a growing Internet.

Some of this was understandable, because online video, promised for a decade, had only just started.

There was also a belief that the digital revolution was being overblown. Particularly in the wake of the dot.com bust.

There were still questions out there about how to build something in this space that actually makes money.

But most often the reaction I got was fear: fear of the unknown, fear of change... terrible fear of losing face.

Because what you were expert in in the past, no longer applied. Because above all, you didn't want to be caught *not knowing the answer*.

Kind of like the student who asked Albert Einstein, when he was teaching at Princeton, why every year Einstein gave precisely the same test. *Wouldn't students be able to get last year's test and cheat on the answers?*

Einstein replied, "You're absolutely right, all the questions are the same. But the answers are entirely different."

That's so typical – we want it tidy, predictable, controllable. And we don't want to not know.

In the digital space, I'm suspicious of people who claim too readily to know the answer.

It's a fail-fast world...How do we live in it? How do we *succeed* in it?

At NBC Universal, we've had to place a number of digital media bets, because no one really knows in the long term how consumers will react or how we're going to make money.

We're using digital to expand existing brands. NBC.com, for instance, is having incredible growth from streaming long-form TV.

We've also gotten into "pure-play" digital properties like iVillage....which, by the way, is growing both traffic and revenue.

And we're even partnering with our competitors...together with News Corp., we launched hulu.com, a premium online video service that debuted last week.

Our goal is to reach a billion dollars of revenue from our digital businesses by 2009. For a 16-billion-dollar company that's a small chunk, but a billion dollars is a critical milestone.

Making money by doing things differently builds confidence. We've made digital *everybody's* job, not just the concern of a centralized team. People are finding that digital requires them to be more collaborative and more creative with groups inside and out of NBC. As a company, we're moving forward by giving up control of the way things use to be.

It's not just for media companies. Now's the time to create a virtual network for you and your company by connecting and collaborating with very different audiences...think of it as a new eco-system of partners that share in success.

That is what I've learned as I've led NBCU further into the digital age. I've also realized my role is to be an integrator... one who has to pull different pieces together – trends, teams, technologies – and create new value.

Understanding the value of trends and audiences, weaving together meaningful stories, being good at integration – those are skills I learned in PR.

Then as GE's Chief Marketing Officer, I had the opportunity to hone those skills even more.

Jeff Immelt's aim – right from the start – was to make GE synonymous with high-value growth, especially the kind that comes from inside, not just from acquiring new businesses.

And he believed that if this were to happen, we had to reinvigorate marketing.

This meant I had to galvanize our 5,000 marketers, with diverse agendas in businesses ranging from aircraft engines to consumer finance.

We said to them, "Here's your job now: your job is to drive change."

The change? Make GE more externally focused – more connected to markets... Most importantly: crank up the idea machines.

Our goal was to use Marketing as a force to better listen to customers and trends, drive revenues and ultimately pull together the entire company.

Yes, there were skeptics – people skeptical of our ability to make a real impact and of the appropriateness of my background.

You won't be surprised to hear that early on, skeptics loomed when it came to predicting how well a former public relations professional would do in a critical operating and product development role.

But what they didn't see was that a background in communications turns out to be incredibly valuable.

Because as communicators we're totally focused on figuring out early what's going on outside the company.

Now some of you will hate hearing this, but I believe that PR people are, at the core, sales people.

Because being a great sales person, like being a great communicator, is all about listening to people and delivering a solution that meets a need.

In my experience, communicating is as much about listening as speaking.

That's what led us to ecomagination.

In business review after review, we kept hearing that customers wanted to do right for the environment, but they could not afford to go broke in the process.

Jeff spotted the trend and said: "Figure out what we can do."

From there we set out to explore the possibilities... The most powerful efforts were "dreaming sessions" we had with our customers... we gathered their ideas, as well as those of anyone we could get our hands on, and came up with something powerful, together – our ecomagination platform.

But – I can still hear the critics

"It's all fluff."

"It's all spin."

"It's just greenwashing."

So it was a test for the company, and honestly, it was a personal test for me.

Holding true to ourselves and our mission, we declared "Green is green" as our mantra, and we set a goal of making \$20 billion dollars by 2010. And only a few years into it, the company is on track, developing new technology, lowering emissions and making indelible connections with our customers.

With something new, there are often as many reasons NOT to do it as there are to do it. GE's history of fighting for the science behind PCBs in the Hudson had led some to believe we lacked credibility – including some within GE.

For more than a decade we fought tough to defend the science. We believed to the core of our being that it was *all about the science*.

But our faith in the science narrowed our vision. We were too busy fighting to solve the issue. We weren't hearing our customers. We weren't engaging others with ideas different from ours.

I learned something really important here. Innovation comes from listening for new ideas, often where you least expect to find them. Then from connecting those disparate pieces into new patterns, into a new strategy.

But what I learned most was this: Optimism fuels courage.

When our position is threatened, our instinct is to lay low, stick with what we know. To head for the bunker.

But innovation requires courage and optimism...honestly; optimism was not a quality I was always known for.

I'll admit, as a PR executive, I frequently spent too much of my time preparing for the worst outcome. The downside of taking my job seriously was I focused on too many of the risks. I could be a touch too cynical about what was possible.

But optimism is a choice. This I learned from Jeff Immelt who says "It's easy to be a cynic today. But cynicism is corrosive because it creates excuses. Optimists own the future."

And he's right.

You have to know when to get out of the bunker. You have to be a Tiger.

At this last US Open in Pittsburgh, everyone was talking about the bunkers on the golf course – so deep they are called "Church Pews." Most of the golfers spent time practicing how to get out of the pews – except for Tiger Woods who spent no time doing this.

A reporter asked him, "How come you're not practicing getting out of the pews?"

Tiger replied, "Because I have absolutely no intention of getting into them."

What Tiger has we can all develop: optimism, courage and the ability to focus on who you are and where you're headed.

To me, it means putting yourself on the line. Let's face it, not always a natural act.

It reminds me of a time when I worked for Jack Welch as his head of PR. The media was hounding him to take a stand on some particular issue – for the life of me; I can't recall what it was.

But I do remember that Maureen Dowd had gotten through to Jack and asked him to go on the record. He walked into my office. “What should I do?” he asked.

I said, “Well, on one hand you could do this or on the other hand you could do that.” Basically a non-answer.

“What the hell are you saying? I don’t pay you for 50-50 answers! *What’s your decision?*”

“I don’t pay you for 50-50 answers.” Jack has such a way of making a point, simply.....and unforgettably.

That advice hit me, hard, because it all comes down to this:

What do you believe? What do you think is right?

For me, it means putting my ego on the line.

I’m not talking about the kind of ego that stands for how much media coverage you get. We all run far away from the types who believe “I’m written about, therefore I am.”

No, I’m talking about ego that says: I believe in this.

It means putting your good name out front, willing to stand for something, even willing to fall for something.

For me that meant summoning the courage to change a venerable tagline, believing that GE could stand for even more than bringing good things to life...

It meant taking a chance on integrating different pieces of a company together to define value beyond “just marketing.”

It means building new digital businesses within the confines of a larger business and having people feel uncomfortable with change – even with me because I represent change... not to mention bloggers relishing every misstep.

It means knowing that experiments have to happen.

That you’ve got to iterate fast in a fail-fast world.

It’s good to come to terms with the fact that when we *really* put it on the line for what we believe in, we’re going to take some flak. It’s a kind of medal of honor to be attacked for what you believe in.

To travel in a communicator’s shoes is to understand this implicitly. It’s in that moment of truth that we get to see what people are really made of.

And it's a rare privilege to have that view.

So, what can we do with this insight?

Well on the one hand....

No here's what we can all do, we can put it on the line.

We can lead.