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Just because it's bad news doesn't mean it's a crisis.

Yet.

Caution: It's not your father's journalism. The precipitous decline of news source credibility dictates a new set of rules for communicating during a business or organizational crisis.

By
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Nobody likes bad news. Most human beings recoil at it. They don't like to hear it, be confronted by it or be forced to respond to it.

But most of all, people hate to *deliver* it.

Some go to remarkable lengths to avoid becoming the delivery vehicle for bad news. The larger the organization or the higher you climb up the executive ladder, the more you'll find this to be true.

Dealing with bad news has never been a welcome assignment, but recently, the erosion of journalistic standards has changed the rulebook for business and organizational leaders forever. Understanding the new strategies necessary for the successful responses to bad news first requires understanding the changed landscape.

How we got here: crisis management in the real world.

When institutional or individual embarrassment, hubris or ego gets in the way of the honest delivery of bad news, the same dangerous behaviors are inevitably repeated. First comes *denial*. "Problem? What problem?" Then *delay*. "If we wait long

enough, this will just go away." Sometimes, the reluctant messenger goes beyond making excuses or blaming somebody else, and intentionally crosses the moral line into *deceit*. In other words, they flat-out lie about the situation. "We did nothing wrong" or "Our tires did not fail" or "There are no layoffs planned."

In crisis management, we call this progression of Deny - Delay - Deceive the "Death Strategy." Not just because they all begin with "D", but because of what happens to organizations when their leaders practice this behavior. Employ the Death Strategy and you'll kill your company's or organization's reputation by destroying the public's trust in it.

Legendary practitioners of the Death Strategy include Enron and Arthur Andersen, both of whom went to the Graveyard of Lost Companies, and Ford and Firestone whose near-fatal experience during the Explorer rollover / exploding tires fiasco caused more than ten billion dollars to evaporate, by way of lost sales, lost market share, whopping legal fees and settlements, government-ordered recalls and punishing fines, and most entertainingly, travel expenses for top Ford, Firestone and Bridgestone execs for their 2001 trip to Washington so they could

be dragged before Congress and be publicly humiliated.

With the exception of fighter pilots and Grand Prix racing drivers, human beings rarely possess the ability to make good decisions rapidly while under great stress. This explains why bad news and crisis responses are so often mishandled. And it also explains why so much useless (or worse, dangerous) advice is peddled by “crisis experts.” They ignore the most basic of human traits – that delivering bad news is a tough, unpleasant and unrewarding task. Against that emotional backdrop, at a time when individuals are likely to be under some of the greatest stress they’ll ever encounter in their careers, it’s darn near impossible to communicate properly without preparation, training and practice.

Interestingly, many otherwise competent public relations people prove to be as uncomfortable and inept around bad news as anyone else. People who – by their training and very nature – tend to believe that communication requires an unrelentingly positive approach just cannot deal with the negativity inherent in bad news. As a result, they often lack the fortitude, skills and credibility necessary to be effective.

Simplicity is a core strategy in successful crisis response. If you ever are presented with a list of “50 Things to Do When Crisis Hits”, run the other way. If your organization’s crisis first response plan fills a thick three-ring binder, abandon all hope. If you intend to properly manage and survive bad news, you must recognize the fundamental crisis dynamic – there is simply no time for preparation, training or practice when one hits. And in addition to having no time, neither will you have the courage nor emotional stamina to remember and do 50 – or even 10 – things. Thus, this article will limit the New Rulebook to just five things learned while managing real-world crisis situations today.

The year 2008 marked a critical ‘Tipping Point’ – time to re-think some of the long-accepted practices, principles and rules of effective crisis and reputation management.

Is Bad News A Crisis Trigger?

Conventional wisdom defines six categories of risk events capable of triggering a business or organizational crisis. Remember, a crisis is defined as any situation that both disrupts normal operations and simultaneously threatens the organization’s reputation.

Because they provide a framework with which to anticipate events, crisis teams use these categories when conducting “what-if?” scenarios for preparedness planning. Smart companies also use them to build early warning systems, since by far the best way to manage a crisis is to avoid it in the first place.

The primary risk areas for organizational crises have traditionally been defined as:

1. **Operating or Business Failure** typically caused by such things as bad management decisions, poor financial performance or outright product failures. In other words, somebody screwed up.
2. **Legal or Ethical** – Examples might be corporate misbehavior or corruption, or regulatory problems leading to threatened or actual government sanctions, fines or penalties.
3. **Individual Misconduct** such as executive or employee wrongdoing, ranging from sexual harassment, bribery, embezzlement, scandal, fraud, racist behavior, to workplace violence.
4. **Political** – Anything from pending legislation that can change business conditions to threats or attacks by special interest and advocacy groups designed to mobilize the political system against you.
5. **Environmental** – From activist attacks to compliance failures to aggressive regulatory initiatives; often beginning with something as simple as environmental damage related to an industrial accident.
6. **Safety and Security** – Any situation that creates fear, uncertainty or panic. Examples

might include industrial accidents; a travel disaster causing sudden loss of key management; failure to take proper precautions related to such things as foreseeable disasters or hazardous conditions; even product tampering and sabotage.

If you think about it, these categories of crisis triggers correlate closely with the core news topics or beats of the traditional news media. One of the fundamentals of American journalism has been its embrace of its role as Public Protector in the face of any perceived danger.

Viewed in that light, the types of triggers described above make perfect sense. However, they also date to the time when television, radio and newspaper newsrooms dictated the daily news cycle.

In recent years, a seventh set of potential crisis triggers has begun to emerge. Once referred to as “Smoldering Crises” and thought to be merely early warnings, changes in indicators such as a plummeting share price, sudden drops in sales, an employee exodus, a buzzing grapevine, pending lawsuits or government investigations, or even just a sudden negative shift in media coverage, suggested trouble might be coming.

So what’s different now? We’ve entered a new world where even *hints* of bad news – things that used to be mere indicators – are now increasingly capable of triggering a full-blown news-driven crisis by themselves. In other words, crises can begin much earlier, and on much shakier causal foundations, than previously thought. Nothing more than a particle of bad news, no matter how incomplete or undeveloped, can morph instantly into big trouble for a company or organization.

What’s worse for crisis managers is that these “bad news”-triggered crises seem to be more difficult to manage, and can potentially do greater damage – than a “real news” crisis based on an actual event.

It’s all the Internet’s fault.

When it comes to reputation management and crisis response, 2008 puts us in brand new and somewhat uncharted territory. The reason? The Internet.

Depending on your point of view, the Internet is either:

- a.) the most wondrous and important communications and information tool ever devised that is transforming business, democracy, society and the world, or
- b.) a fetid swamp of lies, misinformation, perversion, sleaze, fraudulent behavior, unsubstantiated claims, unchecked self-aggrandizement, pathetic self-absorption, smarmy rumors, damaging speculation, deliberate attacks and general mischief making. And oh yes, politics.

Recently, we’ve witnessed a veritable explosion in the number of organizational crises caused not by actual events or facts or truth, but on what passes for “news reporting.” And the triggers? Rumor, speculation, allegations, gossip, invective, and intentional or unintentional humiliation or embarrassment. In short, internet mischief.

- ▶ In August 2008, a prank video posted on MySpace depicted an Ohio Burger King employee taking a bubble bath in a restaurant sink. The four-minute video captured the employee, self-described as “Mr. Unstable”, bathing in a large stainless steel sink as several other employees and a store manager looked on. Needless to say, the Ohio health department was not amused, nor were BK customers and BK’s brand management. How did they find out? It was widely circulated virally and then ... reported as *news*. [A few months later, a copycat incident struck KFC.]
- ▶ In September, United Airlines lost more than \$1 billion dollars in market capitalization when a Google searchbot got confused and dug up a 2002 story about a potential UAL bankruptcy. The item “accidentally” got recirculated in Google *news* searches and *news* alerts. Innocent error or not, it caused

a billion dollars in damage in just a few hours, facilitated by an Internet institution which most people regard as infallible.

- ▶ Later in September, SparkSpread (www.sparkspread.com), the self-proclaimed “leading real-time news service covering financing, M&A, and trading in the energy industry” sent out a “Breaking News” alert that “Constellation Energy Group is understood to be preparing to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.” This came as quite a shock, as just a few days earlier Warren Buffett had seemingly acquired Constellation in a friendly merger approved by the Constellation board. SparkSpread’s alerts went out at 1:36 pm. At 3:59 pm, AP reported Constellation Energy shares had tumbled 9.5 percent in afternoon trading. Constellation’s response that the report was “absolutely false” didn’t hit the Reuters business wire until 4:14pm EDT. While remarkably swift for a large corporation, this response was still unable to prevent some costly damage in the Internet age.
- ▶ In early October, a so-called “citizen journalist” posted a story on CNN’s iReport Web site stating Steven Jobs had been rushed to the ER as a result of a “major heart attack.” The user cited “an insider” who he said “opted to remain anonymous” but was “quite reliable.” Totally bogus, this report nevertheless sent Apple’s stock plummeting by more than 10 percent shortly after its publication. The share price continued falling until Apple representatives came forward to adamantly deny the claims. This was CNN, folks!
- ▶ And as we were wrapping up this article, the AP reported on November 13 that MSNBC retracted its false story that Sarah Palin couldn’t identify Africa as a continent. David Shuster, an anchor for the cable news network, said on air that a McCain policy adviser was the source of a story saying Palin had mistakenly believed Africa was a country instead of a continent. Turns out it was a hoax, perpetrated by two guys who

created a phony “Harding Institute for Freedom and Democracy” and a phony “senior fellow” at the Institute, neither of which exist. More disturbing is the fact that the perpetrators had struck more than once. They previously suckered the Los Angeles *Times*, *the New Republic* and *Mother Jones* into referencing other false material.

These Internet-based events are not a totally new or unanticipated phenomenon. In fact, one of our firm’s crisis engagements back in 2004 involved a vicious Internet attack orchestrated by dissident faculty destroyed both the administration and professional reputation of a college president. Although their online postings crossed the legal line well into slander and libel territory, the cowardly posters cloaked their anonymity so effectively that the legal team could not identify them with sufficient certainty to bring them into a court of law.

The college’s president rejected our pleadings to respond with “I don’t want to sink to their level” and “This is too unseemly”. Once again, “no comment” proved to be “guilty as charged” in the Court of Public Opinion. Sadly for our client, it proved a career-ending decision.

Do you remember when you first saw Sarah Palin in a bikini toting an assault rifle? I do. It was on my Yahoo *NEWS* page. Of course it was a Photoshopped fake. But that didn’t stop someone – I don’t know who – from labeling it as *news*.

And therein lies the core problem: the word “news” still means something, at least for a little while longer.

The 4-way convergence.

In the world of crisis communications and reputation management, we now are in the midst of a game-changing four-way convergence. Okay, I’ll say it. A perfect storm.

First, the Internet has changed fundamental human behavior regarding (what used to be) “mass communications”. The Web taught consumers that

News and Information are now free. And, they're available any time of the day or night, weekend or holiday, all year around. No need to sit around waiting for someone to "push" information and ideas to you. Just search for what you want. Google knows all. You can delete or ignore anything you don't want.

Everything you need to know, whatever you want, it's there on the Internet. And hey, it must be true! If CNN is willing to trust "citizen journalists," that should be good enough for you, right?

But what's most worrisome: you can pass it along to anyone with a simple click on the "Forward" button.

Second, the Internet has fundamentally changed American journalism. Forget fair, balanced, fully sourced or corroborated. The basic tenets or rules of the game, what you and I learned in News 101 in J-school, no longer apply out here in the real world.

We all know that mainstream media newsrooms are shrinking and contracting. [The cynics among us might say that giving away for free what you previously charged for has proven to be an unsustainable business model.] But today's dynamic puts fewer trained journalists and fewer editorially solid newsrooms under enormous pressure to maintain their franchise and livelihood by producing more content than ever before.

And, they must race to beat the new wave of "citizen journalists". In the local market where I live, the daily newspaper reporters – a staff reduced by an estimated 40% by buyouts – is now being required to blog, post breaking news stories and write, produce and appear in online video reports in addition to delivering the print edition stories they've always generated.

Driven by its unquenchable need to fill airtime, Cable TV news has accelerated the phenomenon. If you watch the cable business news channels, you'll observe that a significant portion of their coverage consists of *rumors* being reported. It's just part of the accepted content of business news... as in, "buy on the rumor, sell on the news". But in times past, reporting rumors was never an accepted practice in professional journalism.

You don't have to be an MBA to understand how this corrodes the quality – the accuracy – of today's reporting.

Third, time and competitive pressures are forcing journalists into the fetid swamp – the Internet – for story ideas, information and content. It's faster, easier and cheaper than the old way of doing things. Reporters and editors are stretching further afield for story ideas to compete with the vast scope of what's available on the Internet. In the process, they're embracing some pretty extreme or outrageous content that never would have made it past an old-school editor. In some cases, what's happening on the Internet becomes the news all by itself! In other cases, the mere fact that something – no matter how sketchy – breaks on the Internet prompts the traditional media, fearing being left behind, to respond by covering it as well.

And finally, here's the real core of the problem. Today, we collectively find ourselves in that murky transition period between the time when the traditional news media and journalism dominated and the future digital age where it's all one big kettle of soup available online. The individual is stuck with the responsibility of figuring out what's truth and what's not.

We used to be able to trust major news organizations because they employed experienced, trained journalists who were dependent upon maintaining a solid reputation. How many "iReporters" do you think really care about their reputations as journalists?

As the reach and credibility of traditional news providers declines while the audience turns increasingly to online sources, news consumers have no choice but to develop their own skills in determining the veracity of whatever they obtain from the digital space. But that certainly hasn't happened yet, making information users and news consumers ripe targets for hoaxes and other misinformation, deliberate or not.

Alternatively, we can hope for a new online service that instantly fact-checks and certifies the "truthiness" of every piece of digital content before

it's delivered to us. For one model, think of factcheck.org and how it attempts to check the accuracy of political candidates' claims.

Writing in the *Toronto Star*, Murray Whyte said it best: "where the press used to shield the public from the worst of these baseless, false and factless claims, now there's no gatekeeper. There's no gate. There's not even a fence. This stuff just comes washing over us, and the press has been very slow to realize that its role is no longer gatekeeper, but referee or umpire or a judge - pick the metaphor you want - because people are looking for someone to sort this mess out."

We can all agree that we need the equivalent of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval to certify 100% bogus-free information. But let's be realistic. That's just not likely to happen soon. As Whyte admits, it's impossible to sort "through this massive swirl of babble that keeps coming at us from the online world."

Here's the key point: absent a "UTF" – a universal truth filter – the very word "News" still carries strong connotations that whatever it embraces is believable, credible, to be taken seriously. Just the fact that something is labeled as News, or is carried by or referenced on a known News Outlet, gives it a dangerous power to deceive.

This makes the Internet the perfect vehicle for attacks, mischief, dishonesty and wrongdoing. Identity can be cloaked. Anonymity means the old rule "consider the source" no longer applies. In the absence of traditional journalistic practices, there's no oversight, no checks and balances, no fact checking. Whatever the Internet is, it's not journalism.

Meanwhile, for anyone involved in protecting organizational or individual reputations, it's a cruel world out there. There seems to be no shortage of disgruntled employees, angry customers, enemies, irresponsible noise- or mischief-makers, opponents, critics, self-serving watchdogs and whistleblowers, uncredentialed experts, advocacy groups, publicity seekers and amateur politicians. Every one of them represents a risk factor – and together, a whole new category of risk factors.

Whether they have an agenda or a cause or a grudge or a screw loose, perpetrators have one thing in common: they all need targets or "bad guys" to reach their objectives. The higher your individual or organizational profile, the greater the risk that someone out there might target you as a bad guy.

It's all about time.

Even though he said it a century ago, Mark Twain anticipated our current predicament when he said "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes."

Lurid stuff takes on a life of its own, thanks to instantaneous digital repetition. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on December 16, 2003, Carol Hymowitz said it best: "'Time Compression' is your biggest problem." Referring to the stress inherent in any crisis situation, and compounded by the natural aversion to dealing with bad news, she went on to describe how "weak crisis management prolongs the mess and worsens scandal. Ignoring bad news doesn't make it go away. It causes spiraling problems."

While we are postulating that bad news, either potential or actual, must be considered to be a crisis trigger, it's not bad news by itself that fuels the crisis. *It's the combination of bad news and time mismanagement.* When organizational leaders and crisis managers wait too long to respond, simple bad news compounds into a complex crisis. A delayed response signals a second negative dimension: that management is attempting a cover-up, is hiding, or avoiding responsibility, any one of which tends to make people angry and impossible to reason with.

Research has shown that the damage from negative news does not correlate to its intensity... it's a function of time. The longer the duration that bad news is allowed to prevail, the greater the long term damage. This applies to any negative story... in the press, or viral online or via word of mouth. Thus, getting the story over with and behind you must always be the crisis manager's primary objective.

For many years now, we've taught that the most effective crisis response occurs in "The Golden Hour." In our crisis training program, we stress that above all else, an organization must be ready to respond within one hour from the declared onset of a crisis.

That was then; this is now. In the October 13, 2008 *New York Times*, reporter Noam Cohen observed that "most of the damage from false (Internet-driven) reports occurs in less than an hour."

So if 2008 was a Tipping Point for Crisis Managers, it's time to rethink crisis strategy. It's time for a new set of Best Practices for Responding to Bad News.

Taken together, these guidelines form a new rulebook -- a coherent master strategy intended to prevent bad news from triggering a full-blown, nasty, unpleasant, reputation-damaging and expensive-to-fix organizational crisis.

Rule 1: If bad news is going to come out anyway, YOU should release it first, proactively and preemptively.

Your mom was right. In life, you only get one chance to make a good first impression.

And when bad news is imminent, you only get one chance to shape and control the story... at the very beginning. Being first to reveal a negative story about yourself defuses anger, suspicion and hostility, thus changing the entire tone of how it's reported and how it's perceived.

This strategy works because admitting your own failures marks you as a "stand-up guy" and in our culture, a stand-up guy almost always gets forgiveness and a second chance when they deserve it. This dynamic also tends to make the story fade away quickly.

Ignoring people's legitimate concerns during a crisis can never work. It's an insult, and that just makes people angrier or more likely to panic from the rumors and speculation that arise to fill the void created by your silence.

Why is this so important? *Because you simply cannot reason with angry or panicked people.* And if you cannot reason with them, you have rendered yourself impotent in ending the crisis.

Ignoring bad news doesn't make it go away. Remaining silent means you agree with your accusers... which usually equates to "Guilty as charged". Attempting to cover up bad news rarely worked in the past, and has even less chance of succeeding in today's Internet culture of total transparency. Both gambits merely cause problems that spiral out of control.

When your mom said "Silence is Golden", she called that one wrong.

**Rule 2:
Practice full disclosure – get it all out at once.**

If all the bad news comes out at once, then you have a realistic chance for a short-lived crisis. (We used to call them one-day stories back in the old days when there were such things as editions and news cycles.)

If on the other hand, parts of the stories are withheld so they might come out in dribs and drabs later, then all you've guaranteed yourself is a lingering, multi-day story.

Remember, the longer the duration of a bad news story, the greater the ultimate damage. When a negative story is repeated, the perceptions it creates become reinforced and remembered longer.

**Rule 3:
The best way to answer tough questions is to answer them before they're asked.**

This is a corollary of Rule 1. If you anticipate the worst, the nastiest, the most uncomfortable questions and then answer them honestly and completely in clear direct language, you will further defuse anger, suspicion and hostility. You will look like someone who is not trying to hide, and thus will benefit from the "stand-up guy" phenomenon.

Sounds easy, but it's not. Consider the credibility and end result contained in Nokia's CEO Simon Beresford-Wylie's language regarding layoffs of 3,000 human beings: "With the successful completion of these plans, we will have the vast majority of the synergy-related headcount reductions completed and we can then start to put this chapter of our history behind us and focus on creating a world-class company."

Not surprisingly, Paul McNamara of *NetworkWorld.com* ranted against "A tone-deaf Nokia Siemens public relations department that goes so far as to put these mealy-mouthed words on the CEOs lips." Apparently, being told that you are a "synergy-related headcount reduction" is supposed to make you feel better. McNamara said "Actually, it tells me that someone doesn't care all that much ... and thinks I'm an idiot."

If you want people to pay attention, you have to level with them. Facts are specific, platitudes are ignored. In a bad news situation, jargon-laden CEO-speak can be seen as a cloak for scoundrels and cowards to hide behind.

**Rule 4:
Facts and actions are the only things that trump rumors and speculation.**

In a crisis or bad news situation, it's unlikely that you will have the complete solution to the problem in the first minutes or hours. People aren't stupid. They understand that.

What they want to know is that *you* know there's a problem, and that you're on top of it, and are taking responsibility for fixing it.

"At 2:30 pm today, we learned of a problem with our (whatever). By 3:00 PM, a team of our best technical personnel had assembled and was determining how to fix it. As soon as we know more about the situation, we will post the information on our website" is a sufficiently fact-based and action-based message to get you through the early minutes of a crisis.

**Rule 5:
Always reveal and share the bad news with your own people first.**

More importantly, *give them full permission to share the news and your response to it* whenever and wherever they encounter concerned people.

In today's world, the majority of employees have access to company-provided email. Our preferred tactic today is to utilize e-mail for crisis and bad news response communications whenever possible, knowing that the "Forward" button is one click away.

"What?" You say. "Give our own employees morale-destroying bad news?"

Seriously, do you think they won't get the news as soon as it breaks on-line? That their friends and family and customers and professional colleagues won't be sending them e-mails or texts with "What's happening?" "What's going on?" "What does it mean?"

Think of what it says to them if your own people are ignorant of the news while the rest of the world knows all about it. It says you don't trust them. And if in fact you don't trust them to defend and support their own organization, then you have far larger problems than we can address here.

On November 5, 2008, *The New York Times* carried a report on how endemic blogging about layoffs and downsizing is these days, giving multiple examples of bloggers reporting layoffs before the affected employees even knew.

Quoted in that article, Rusty Rueff, a former human resources exec at Electronic Arts and PepsiCo, said "Today, whatever you say inside a company will end up on a blog. So you have a choice as a company – you can either be proactive and take the offensive... or you can let someone else write the story for you."

We say the odds of you liking how someone else writes the story are close to nil.

What to tell your CEO now.

To some, “reputation management” conjures up the impression of an abstract and unmeasurable theory that doesn’t add much to an institution’s value equation. When you encounter such skeptics, it’s helpful to remind them exactly how much value a reputation underpins and supports.

Reputations are like magnets. Good ones attract people and relationships to companies and organizations. Bad ones repel them.

And to any CEO or CFO, the business costs of operating with a damaged reputation are guaranteed to get their attention. If they want to measure them, suggest they look right on the bottom line.

Why? If a company must constantly struggle to overcome a poor or negative reputation, then it will be condemned to spending more to accomplish less than its competitors.

Winning new customers will cost more, and your marketing costs will be higher.

Recruiting the best employees will cost more.

Financing costs will be higher. Getting community or public support to expand (or in some cases, even continue) operations will cost more. Governmental or regulatory compliance will cost more. Your legal bills will probably cost more.

Nearly every aspect of the business’ or organization’s activities will have higher costs embedded in them.

And for those with poor reputations, every little controversy becomes protracted, more painful, more costly. So there’s something called “distraction cost.” When management is consumed by putting out fires, they’re not growing the business. In business school, that’s called opportunity cost, and it’s lost.

We tell you all this, because you may be serving a company or organization whose leaders may be bad-news averse. They may not like to hear bad news, be confronted by it or be forced to respond to it. Surely, they will hate to deliver it, as they inevitably will be forced to some day.

The Five New Rules above can save your organization’s reputation, but only if you have the ability – and management’s approval and buy-in – to use them in the first few minutes after bad news strikes and a crisis starts to unfold.

About the Author:

Peter M. Kapcio heads the crisis communications practice at Eric Mower and Associates Public Relations and Public Affairs, ranked among the Top 50 PR agencies in the US by PRWeek. EMA’s Reputation Management Services group has been retained in over 200 crisis or emerging-crisis engagements for companies and organizations in the last decade.

Kapcio last wrote about crisis triggers in the 2006 edition of the Public Relations Society of America’s Crisis Management Guidebook in an article entitled “Smart Companies Build Early Warning Systems.” Since then, fundamental changes in journalism along with today’s Internet-accelerated news cycle have created a new type of crisis with a unique dynamic, necessitating specialized strategies and tactics in order to protect organizations’ reputations and bottom lines.

Kapcio holds a Master’s degree in advertising and consumer behavior from S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and a B.S. in Marketing from the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University.