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Do No Harm

Repeated Self-Inflicted Reputation Wrecks: Charlie Sheen is not the first and won't be the last

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Most people agree that actor [Charlie Sheen](#) needs some help from experts. For whatever he may be going through with [addiction](#) and [behavior](#) issues, there are plenty of skilled people who can provide the right help. That is not my area, but I do know a little about public relations. And that's where Mr. Sheen could learn from the mistakes of [BP's](#) executives, [Stanley McChrystal](#), [Tiger Woods](#) and a long list of others who have ignored the tenets of public relations. Sheen could also learn from those who either got it right the first time—or the second or third time. You *can* rebuild your image, but at some point, you must stop destroying it.

The fundamental rules of reputation management are straightforward, and they don't change. If you're in the communications profession, you hear them time and time again. Books about [crisis management](#) and related public relations themes restate the same rules repeatedly. Seminars for PR professionals, workshops for executives, and well-paid expert speakers also use or cite example after example. However, they also cite example after example of individuals and organizations breaking the rules—and paying the price.

These principles of PR are rather simple, obvious, well-known and understood. However, high-powered celebrities, leaders of multinational organizations and others who face public scrutiny constantly ignore them and repeat the same mistakes. Whether it's the heat of the moment, an attitude of invulnerability or simply forgetting to get good advice before reacting, people in the public eye continue to repeat history, and their missteps impact or destroy careers, companies and solid reputations.

I believe there is another reason, and it's a familiar subject that's driven much change in communications: the Internet. When you're faced with the speed of

communications that can damage a reputation in the blink of a [tweet](#), you tend to react as quickly as possible and forget the simplest of rules.

With this in mind, we should all adopt the medical tenet, [The Hippocratic Oath](#). "Do no harm" is clear. We can easily understand and hope that all physicians are committed to it when they recommend surgery, drug therapy or other treatments that affect our bodies and our lives. Putting a "Hippocratic Oath" in reputation management could help avoid image-destroying disasters that come from ignoring even these simplest of proven strategies for communications: tell the truth, don't repeat a negative, and you are never off-the-record.

Tell the truth.

It is the first of the [Arthur Page Principles](#). [Page](#), one of the revered founders of the PR profession, is credited with this true, strong and rather obvious rule. It's hard to argue with it. Ultimately, the truth will be found. So come clean immediately.

It's happened time and time again for, well, forever. You can go back in history for centuries or millennia to know that lying just doesn't work. In April and May 2010, BP's early pronouncements of the amount of oil spilling in the Gulf Coast demonstrated that not being open, honest and transparent doesn't work. Whether or not they thought the oil leaking was less than what it really was no longer mattered when the truth was known. It was a *lot* more, and it set the tone for the media attack and public rancor that followed. Lied? Maybe not. It's tough to estimate things like leaks when they happen. It takes time. It's hard to know, for example, how much damage a fire, a hurricane or other disaster does. In fact, you really don't know how many people die in a tragedy until you count the bodies. But you don't make an estimate. You wait for data.

Regardless of what BP really thought or knew, it was a bad call to make projections and then change them, correct them, increase them and, at worst, try to explain why the numbers were wrong. It doesn't mean BP is corrupt. They might have tried their best to get the right numbers. Nor does it mean BP's senior executives were lying. Then CEO [Tony Hayward](#) and his communications staff might have thought they were giving accurate data. And it doesn't matter if people were working hard to fix the leak. The damage was done. Credibility was gone when revised figures for the amount spilling kept changing, increasing and building to stunning amounts as the days and weeks went by.

When you don't have a relative amount of certainty of the facts, you don't put out information until you're sure. So the truth was lost and faith in the firm's ability to manage the spill was gone. No matter what they did right, no matter how well they dealt with the people of the [Gulf Coast](#), and regardless of the investment they made to truly fix the situation, the first impressions based on erroneous estimates were bad.

As BP demonstrated, it's *possible* to recover from misstatements. But it's *expensive*, and it's better for everyone if you simply stick to the known facts. In the case of the [Deepwater Horizon](#) blowout, not only would it have been better for BP to tell the truth, but better for everyone - for the [environment](#), for ocean wildlife, for the fishermen. The low estimate of the actual spill rate led to a slower response from everyone and only made the disaster worse. Next time, take a lesson from former Secretary of Defense [Donald Rumsfeld](#): tell the world "what you know, and what you know that you don't know."

Don't repeat a negative.

[Media training](#) is a big and lucrative field. Teaching someone how to handle a [60 Minutes](#) interview or nasty questions from the toughest [New York Times](#) reporter is a remarkable skill. This is not about lying. It is not about denying. It is about not throwing fuel on a fire.

Former President Richard Nixon said, "[I'm not a crook.](#)" For decades, professors of journalism, communications and public relations used Nixon's denial as *the* primary example of what not to say. Nixon was tainted with the word *crook*, in part because he used exactly that word. He made tremendous efforts to rehabilitate himself and, in many minds, did great things as an ex-president. But that one line is infamous among the gurus of communications when they talk about the rules that people under fire must follow.

In the 2010 U.S. Senate race in Delaware, Christine O'Donnell was being ridiculed by opponents about earlier connections with witchcraft. O'Donnell is not a communications expert. She was a fresh new face on the political scene. She might not have known about the rule of not repeating a negative, but one would think that someone who has survived the primary and is in the national spotlight would have advisors who knew the rules. Well, if they did, they disregarded the rules and had her say to the world, "[I'm not a witch.](#)"

To the world and, more importantly, to the voters, Christine O'Donnell became a joke. Just like Richard Nixon's claim that he wasn't a crook became infamous, so was O'Donnell's statement that she wasn't a witch. It gave every media outlet, [legitimate or not](#), the opportunity to replay her statement over and over. She handed her opponent the election. The shocking thing is that this was not a slip in an interview. It was not something caught on tape that was a side conversation with a supporter or friend. It was a scripted, planned and intentional statement in a paid advertisement.

Nixon got impeached and resigned. O'Donnell lost. Don't repeat a negative.

Everything is on-the-record.

Rolling Stone magazine asked Four-Star General Stanley A. McChrystal for an interview. He did the interview. He said things he shouldn't have, but according to [reports](#) quoting his supporters, McChrystal thought certain things he said were "off the record." The truth? You are never off-the-record. *Never.* The communications professional can do off-the-record. The CEO, the general, or whoever the head honcho might be is never off-the-record.

The professional who has the relationships and reputation with a small, select number of journalists can use [off-the-record](#) wisely—but at his or her own risk. It's a way to provide factual information that supports an issue to a journalist who has proved trustworthy. When done right, off-the-record can mean getting the truth out and getting a story in the media that is accurate and fair without disclosing the source. It's useful if the information the source is providing, could be harmful to a firm or an individual who is doing the right thing, but is prohibited from talking about it. It's tricky and it's controversial, no doubt. But if it goes wrong, typically only the communication expert goes down. Meanwhile, the firm can recover, the candidate can be vindicated, or the issue is seen accurately. But it can't be abused for gain. That violates the first principle: tell the truth.

For the communications professional, that's the carefully calculated risk one takes. It's not great, but it's OK and, sometimes, necessary. There are situations in which you can't give information on-the-record that is proper, correct and appropriate. For instance, you are prevented by lawyers, by bankers and by other restrictions from providing on-the-record, truthful, accurate and important information that helps the public and other constituents understand an otherwise difficult issue.

For example, if a reporter is about to publish a story about the price of an acquisition that is 10 times the amount paid, you might need to act to protect the investors. Stock movements, based on rumor or speculation, are bad for investors and can inhibit the completion of what would otherwise be a good deal for all involved. If a reporter intends to write something patently wrong that will affect the stock price and distort the reputation of the firm to the detriment of employees and others, he or she must consider the options.

It can even be the case that misleading information or comments will destroy the solid reputation of an honest individual. In those cases, it's hard to fault the PR rep who says to a trusted journalist, "Let me tell you the truth off-the-record." To go off-the-record is a very slippery slope. It's a very dangerous idea. It is never a first option and it is often the last resort. But it is sometimes (though rarely—and always with knowledge of the reporter whom you are dealing with) the right thing to do.

For the CEO, the actor, the general and everyone else, **don't** go off-the-record. It can only be right for certain people to go off-the-record if they have done the right groundwork. The media relations expert or the external publicist who has built the

relationship with a publication and the individual journalist should have the option to make the decision to go off-the-record. They can not only make the judgment call on going off-the-record, but they can also best determine if it is in the interest of the CEO, the firm or the celebrity to talk to the journalist. They can also be “burned,” take the fall and move on. The CEO, the firm and the celebrity are the commodity. If they fail, the value is gone.

When going off-the-record, the spokesman takes a calculated risk. It's the price you pay for misplacing trust in journalists who make their salary from stories they write, broadcasts they make, or blogs or tweets they put out to the world.

It's not about you.

There are actually many other tenets of [good public relations](#). In fact, good communicators follow many important rules for their companies, their clients and themselves. But the three I have listed can provide good guideposts for anyone. Whether you're a celebrity, the CEO of a company or a designated spokesperson, you can decide to follow these tenets or suffer the consequences.

The good news? Reputations *can* be restored. It takes time, but (as [Britney Spears](#) showed by simply getting out of the spotlight) you can come back. Even Richard Nixon regained a certain amount of renewed credibility late in life by providing wisdom on foreign policy. And to BP's credit, once Tony Hayward took the fall, the new CEO avoided stumbles, and the advertising to promote the good the firm is doing to restore the Gulf has been effective.

It's 2011. Everything you say, write or do will get to everyone. Your employees, your regulators, your constituents and even your fans will get the information. Online, in the printed press or on TV and radio, what you do and say will be known. So do the right thing.

If you make a mistake and don't do the right thing, then do the next best. Tell the truth. If you are a good person or a good organization and follow that one tenet, you won't repeat a negative and you won't need to go off-the-record. The record will speak for itself.

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