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Media News & Intelligence for PR Pros

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BARKS & BITES

Do the Right Thing, Right Now — It's Time for PR to Stop Practicing "Truthiness"

Exec exhorts PR to not only tell the truth—but to also hear it when invoked by the media, public and other key stakeholders.

By **Kenneth D. Makovsky**

President, Makovsky + Company

A tidal wave of celebrity disinformation, corporate scandals and political corruption seems to be swamping the old-fashioned American values of honesty, truth and trust.

Every time I pick up the newspaper these days, I'm confronted with another example of the phenomenon of "truthiness." Coined by Stephen Colbert, host of the Comedy Channel's "Colbert Report" truthiness refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one *wants* to be true, rather than concepts or facts *known* to be true.

There's the Enron trial Kenneth Lay's legal strategy positions him as incompetent, disengaged and overpaid rather than admitting his mistakes. There's James Frey, the author who essentially fabricated his own life story in his autobiography, *A Million Little Pieces*. And there's the media firestorm ignited by Dick Cheney's failure to address the American public following the accidental shooting of his friend, Harry Whittington.

Every day brings new revelations of high-profile people—people who should know better—playing fast and loose with the facts in an attempt to sound credible.

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That doesn't mean that you can't take the time to investigate the facts and present them to the advantage of your company or client; but it's always better to

"out" yourself rather than risk losing control of your messages by waiting too long. Coverups are almost always uncovered and they can taint the credibility of individuals and institutions for a very long time. There's a corollary to my injunction to tell the truth. It is that we, as Americans, have to be willing to hear the truth.

Today, we can select the mainstream media, websites, blogs and news feeds that confirm our existing interests and prejudices and demonize the views of those who don't share our perspective ... or we can be open to the opportunities for positive change presented by really listening to the truth-tellers.

The truth that sets us free is sometimes the truth we're reluctant to hear. In last Sunday's *New York Times* (1), for example, there was a story about a pharmaceutical analyst, Michael Krensavage, who tried to tell the truth, as he saw it, and got an earful of invective from an angry investor, who attempted to bully the analyst into revising his evaluation of a company's performance.

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It's not just cranky shareholders who are outraged when truth triumphs over truthiness. *Corporate executives have been known to freeze analysts out of conference calls, decline media interviews and pull advertising from offending print publications ... rather than address the underlying operational issues that have caused a problem to be exposed. They're only delaying an inevitable, unhappy outcome. Do the right thing. It's always in your own best interest.*

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