

## ISN'T IT GOOD PR TO APOLOGIZE? LAWYERS DON'T WANT YOU TO DO IT – EVER – AS MEDIA NOTICE IN M.I.T. CASE

Psychological studies show that “I’m sorry” ranks just behind “please help me” as the most powerful of appeals. But practitioners who want to harness this power for clients or employers run into the old pr v. lawyers problem. So much so that under the headline “MIT revives a fading art,” *Boston Globe* columnist Brian McGrory states that

- Only if “MIT’s corporation counsel (was) bound, gagged & locked in the sprockets lab” can he understand how “the president of MIT (could) issue a public apology in the hazing death 3 years ago of an underclass student”

Not only did Charles Vest apologize, he hugged the dead boy’s mother & said, “I hope this isn’t too late” – referring to the \$6-million check MIT paid to settle the suit brought against it for negligence.

McGrory’s familiarity with this lawyerly issue goes deep (& perhaps his attitude toward attorneys):

- “Yes, a public apology, as in an admission of wrongdoing, an expression of regret, some humane words, all for the whole world to see
- “Because of this, there are lawyers all over America wearing black armbands today. There are partners in white-shoe firms gathering in conference rooms in downtown skyscrapers at this very moment so stricken they can’t enjoy their lavish catered lunches. There are law professors at the most prestigious schools burning thru case files in a vain search for precedents”

### WHAT IS PR TO DO?

When suits are settled, lawyers usually ask that records be sealed.

They only settle to avoid the cost & uncertainty of a trial. And of course no wrongdoing is admitted. Firestone, Ford, Mitsubishi are currently suffering reputational disasters thanks to this legal syndrome. In contrast, look what an apology did for Tylenol – & the company wasn’t to blame for the problem! Or, Richard Nixon, who bailed out his career many times by apologizing. Indeed, an informal study for the Republican Party shortly before he resigned showed a 50/50 chance an apology – accepting blame – might have let him finish out his term. Thoughts:

1. **Practitioners must be able to mount a bottom-line case** demonstrating that losses in the Court of Public Opinion will be greater than those of a lost lawsuit, or the “never ending string of lawsuits” attorneys invariably predict will follow should the org’s admit any responsibility.
2. **This usually means building relationships with the law dep’t & outside counsel**, working to educate them of pr’s philosophy & showing a turfing battle helps no one – all in advance of any incidents, of course. Evidence suggests only a small number of pr pros take the time to do this.
3. **If this means pr appears once again as “the conscience of the org’n,”** don’t hesitate to play that role. Not because we’re holier than others. Because experience shows it pays off.
4. **Above all, practitioners cannot be cowed by lawyerly arrogance** – “only we know best.”

As for MIT, “It did the good & decent thing; it apologized. What a shame it’s so unusual.” (Copy of column from [pr](#))

## TEXT ON COMPUTER SCREENS HARDER TO UNDERSTAND, LESS PERSUASIVE & LESS INTERESTING, OHIO STATE U. STUDY FINDS

Many have suggested from personal experience that whatever other advantages they have, Websites, Intranets & e-mail are not as effective *in delivering communication* as print. Now an OSU study supports this assertion.

- Study asked 131 undergrads to read 2 *Time* articles, then respond to a questionnaire. Some read the magazine while others read the same text on a computer screen. Prior to reading, they were tested on their existing knowledge & beliefs on the subjects of the articles
- Students who read from the paper text found it easier to understand & more convincing, while those who read on the computer had more difficulty
- This despite the fact kids have grown up with the medium & their visual acuity is at its peak. Older readers can be expected to have more difficulty. Computer experience had no bearing on results

### MULTI-LINEAR LOGIC UNHONED

The researchers theorize that print media feature “linear texts” comprised of connected discourse

intended to be processed from left to right with requisite sweeps & stops. On-line texts, on the other hand, while closely resembling traditional linear, “are not structured to be processed linearly from left to right.... In some cases, not even intended to be processed in any particular order,” say the researchers. Web pages, for example, are fluid, dynamic, and offer the reader multiple paths for navigation & understanding. But the eye is not trained to function like that.

The researchers conclude that tho readers can be persuaded by computerized texts, the medium presents learning hurdles – not least that the on-screen material was deemed less interesting, probably because it was harder to understand.

- “There’s no reason for this. But we think readers develop strategies about how to remember & comprehend printed texts” but are not able to transfer those strategies to computerized texts
- “Moreover, as computerized texts become more multilinear, it would seem that poorer readers would have even more difficulty gleaning understanding” (Copy of study from [pr](#))

**One practical pr implication: This joins other research in questioning the rush to computer learning in schools & colleges.** “We shouldn’t make it more difficult for students to learn,” says co-author Karen Murphy, an educational psychologist. “A lot of questions have to be answered before we continue further into making computers part of the curriculum.” School & corporate-donor practitioners may have to defend their orgn’s actions if more research supports the cautionary trend.

## SEX IN THE SUPERMARKET FORCES SAFEWAY TO FIELD ACTIVIST GROUP'S CONCERNS OVER "GLOSSY GARBAGE"

When magazine guru Samir Husni noted that mainstream magazines are sexing it up (pr 7/17), he may not have realized that activism is afoot to counter the trend. Whereas mags like *Playboy* & *Penthouse* are kept out of view of the checkout line, periodicals like *Redbook* & *Glamour* enjoy full visibility – & their covers are hotter than ever. Not only are the pictures provocative, but the headlines, e.g. *Glamour's* "What Men Think About Your Orgasm Face" & "How to Touch a Naked Man" are pitting family rights activists against free speech advocates.

### SAFEWAY'S SLIPPERY SLOPE

In the middle is Safeway (Pleasanton, Calif), whose president has thus far declined invitations to meet with the American Family Ass'n, Rev. Don Wildman's peripatetic attackers who succeeded in getting the Kroger chain to cover the magazines. Safeway's reticence has AFA in a lather. "The nation's no. 2 grocery store chain apparently thinks it is not worth a single hour of discussion," says AFA's Website.

- **Safeway's Response:** "If Steven Burd met with every group that wanted to meet with him, he'd never be able to do his job," vp pa Brian Dowling told pr. He adds that the chain has approached the magazine industry & told them to tone it down. "Every few years or so, the magazine industry tries to push the envelope. That seems to be what's happening"
- **AFA's Position:** It cites a Wirthlin Worldwide poll showing 73% of parents feel trashy mags like *Cosmo* & *Glamour* should not be openly displayed in check-out lanes – where the maxim of "look somewhere else if you don't like it" is not easy to do. Timing is good, coinciding with presidential campaign debate over sex & violence in tv, movies, video games

### HOW SUCH ORG'NS OFTEN GET WHAT THEY WANT

AFA plans to organize grassroots activism in Safeway communities. "If corporate officials won't listen, perhaps local store managers will." Some of their tips to members:

1. **Speak to the store manager.** With magazine in hand, share your concern.... Ask to know the company's policy.
2. If the manager has authority, **ask him to remove the specific issue** from the checkout aisle or place a blinder over it, leaving only the title exposed.
3. Ask for the company's corporate address. **Write a letter to the president**, sending a copy to the local store manager.
4. **Start a phone tree**, asking friends to call the local store manager.
5. **Encourage others to contact the store.** Distribute petitions asking the store to cover magazines with overt sexual content. Some chains provide pre-addressed & postage paid comment cards. Distribute these to those who agree with your position.
6. **Form a coalition of like-minded citizens.** Address local groups such as bible clubs, ladies groups, Sunday School classes for support.

7. **Request a formal meeting with the manager.** *Ask community leaders to attend.* Politely warn the store that if they continue to display the magazines uncovered, you will be forced to make the issue public & will encourage other families to stop shopping at his store.
8. **Letters to the editor of the local paper** is a good recruiting tool for gaining support.
9. If all else fails, organize a **peaceful picket** of the store. Contact AFA for the brochure "Organizing an Effective Picket."

Dowling says Safeway's pr department has agreed to meet with AFA. "I think they will want us to put blinders up or remove the magazines," he says. "Blinders" are sleeves that mask everything but the title. "It's a slippery slope for us."

## PR PROF OFFERS "A MADISON AVENUE APPROACH TO DOING GOOD" THAT MAY HELP ENLIST EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERS

Syracuse U pa prof William Coplin says his mission is to rescue the term "do gooder" from ridicule – which could be extremely useful for practitioners meeting management or employee resistance to volunteer or social responsibility programs. He wants people to know they don't have to be Mother Theresa to do good. In his new book, *How You Can Help: An Easy Guide to Doing Good Deeds in Your Everyday Life*, Coplin, also dir of pa in SU's Maxwell School of Citizenship & PA, outlines the following resolutions:

1. **Take advantage of quickie do gooding opportunities**, e.g. find groups that do big things like paint houses for low income seniors or install a swing set at an inner-city park.
2. **Become a virtual volunteer.** Stay home and help organizations with research & pr. Contact [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)
3. **Take a "do good" vacation.** You could plant trees in Antigua, do community development work in Kenya, or volunteer at national parks in the US. "These vacations are inexpensive when you realize that you get double the benefits for your time."
4. **Urge your college alumni org'n** to do good. "Follow the lead of Princeton Class of '55 ([www.project55.org](http://www.project55.org)) which works to help the nonprofit sector" and mount fundraising & pr for specific problems like TB or improving K-12 education.
5. **Encourage your employer** to do good. "Lobby management to help society as a form of social investment. Join committees of employees who volunteer, explore options in which you can volunteer on your employer's clock.
6. **Reward companies** that are working hard to improve society. "Or at least buy products from Ben & Jerry's, Tom's of Maine & and Paul Newman's, who give profits to charity.
7. Offer **pro bono work**, for pr, legal assistance, etc.

Coplin calls his book "a Madison Avenue approach to changing our social values." (*More from John Harvith at 315/443-4152.*)