

Harassment claims raise PR Cain

The media feeding frenzy over the sexual harassment claims against Herman Cain happens to be the current preoccupation of the political class, but it also holds good lessons for any executive facing a personal scandal or controversy.

Among Cain's lessons:

- Know that like water seeking its own level, dirt finds its way to the media — so be prepared. It is an unpardonable sin that the Cain organization wasn't prepared for the story about the lawsuit, especially since the publication that broke the story called the campaign about it 10 days before it ran. If you think this kind of story is unique to politics, remember that Paul Levy is no longer running Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital.

- Don't think you can use process to kill a bad story. When Cain was first confronted, he said, in essence, that he was not going to respond to anonymous allegations — no doubt hoping to shame the reporters into what he would consider more responsible behavior or expose the unfairness of anonymous attacks. The use of anonymous sources is not only acceptable in political journalism, it's time-honored. Also, by the time a reporter confronts you, the story is done, with the exception of getting your response.

- Don't change the substance of your response. Every time you do, you generate another story and drive another nail into the coffin of your credibility. Cain changed his response twice within the first 24-hour news cycle. He's changed it more since.



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- When you're sued, don't make limiting financial liability your only objective. Think about what settling will do to your reputation. In business, settling to avoid the cost and aggravation of litigation is understood. Not so with the media and public, who think you must have done something wrong, even with the typical disclaimers in settlements about not admitting guilt.

- If you know with near 100 percent certainty that the bad story is coming out, be proactive. What if, instead of allowing this mess to spread beyond his control, Cain had said, before anyone even asked, something like, "I want to tell you that when I was head of the restaurant association, I was accused of sexual harassment. The accusations were baseless and irresponsible. The association decided as a business matter to settle the case to avoid long, costly litigation." It might have been seen in the context of Cain's straightforward, businesslike manner. It certainly would have given the campaign more control over the story and avoided the current competitive feeding frenzy.

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