



Fraser P. Seitel has been a communications consultant, author and teacher for 30 years.

He is the author of the Prentice-Hall text *The Practice of Public Relations*, now in its tenth edition, and co-author of *Idea Wise*.

June 1, 2010

BP's TWO KILLER PR MISTAKES

BP Plc is [probably finished as a company](#).

The beleaguered Gulf Coast polluter has lost billions in market value, faces millions more in cleanup expenses, and hundreds of lawsuits. It's likely that after the mud settles, BP will be purchased by Exxon or Shell and cease to exist as a company.

But it will linger in the annals of mega PR crises – taking its place next to the Exxon Valdez in textbooks ([Know of a good one?](#)).

The BP reputation is down for the count. Nothing the company can do from here on will fully resurrect its reputational standing. Indeed, in this third decade since the Exxon tanker piloted by a tanked captain befouled Alaska's perimeter, the Exxon company still stands today as a symbol to many of corporate greed and arrogance.

So just as the Gulf's pelicans are soiled, so too is BP's PR goose cooked.

Which is somewhat ironic – because other than two whopping PR mistakes, the company has tried admirably to acquit itself positively in the Court of Public Opinion, even as it battles the worst oil spill in history.

Clearly, BP learned from Exxon's disastrous handling of the Valdez spill 21 years ago.

- While Exxon was closed-mouthed about its observations and intent in Valdez, BP has been available and communicative.
- While Exxon's CEO Lawrence Rawl was famously “too busy” to get his big behind up early to Alaska to view the spill first-hand, BP's Tony Hayward has camped out in the Gulf, leading the effort to plug the hole and personally enduring all the brickbats from outraged residents and self-serving politicians.
- While Exxon's tone was defensive and standoffish from the get-go, BP early on agreed to pick up the costs for “all legitimate claims” and expressed appropriate remorse for not succeeding in cleaning up the spill. As Hayward put it after one unsuccessful attempt, “I feel devastated...absolutely glutted.”

So despite the fact that local opportunists, like Florida Sen. Bill Nelson, leapt at every chance to gain national air time by bad mouthing BP's PR, the company tried to be straightforward and responsive.

That BP suffered a terminal loss in credibility was due, principally, to the company's violation of two sacrosanct crisis management principles:

#1 - Never predict.

In 1958, when Brooklyn Dodger catcher Roy Campanella underwent hours of surgery after a car accident on an icy Long Island road, his surgeon was asked, "Will Campy play again next year."

The beleaguered surgeon responded that it was unlikely Campanella would be back so soon but..."with proper rehabilitation, there's no reason he can't resume play sometime in the future."

Roy Campanella would require a wheel chair for the rest of his life.

The moral: In a crisis, never predict.

That's why it was suicidal early in the BP crisis, when CEO Hayward volunteered to Britain's Sky News that he believed the Gulf of Mexico spill would result in a "very, very modest" environmental impact.

Uh oh.

Years from now, when BP no longer exists, except in PR text books, few will remember that Hayward's full quote was lot more measured, "It is impossible to say and we will mount, as part of the aftermath, a very detailed environmental assessment but everything we can see at the moment suggests that the overall environmental impact will be very, very modest."

Too late. The BP CEO's "modest impact" prediction --- played in an endless loop on cable TV -- was enough to sink his company.

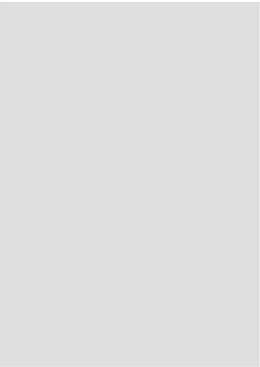
#2 - Downplay expectations.

Equally as deadly for BP was the company's continued penchant for raising expectations, only to suffer public opprobrium when they didn't pan out.

It is axiomatic in public relations that the greater one tamps down expectations, the more likely to look like a hero if the expectations are exceeded. Simply stated, it is better to "low ball" potential outcomes, i.e. anticipate the worst, than it is to get everyone's hopes up and risk having them dashed.

BP first estimated that no oil was leaking, making the problem seem more manageable. Then the company raised estimates to 42,000 gallons, then 210,000 gallons, and now ... well, you get the point. Had BP warned that a great amount of oil might leak, the company's credibility wouldn't have suffered so dearly in light of the constantly increasing numbers.

BP also reported that its "top kill" attempt to stop the leak was "going well." Hours later, the company paused the procedure, and ultimately cut it off in failure. Again, had the company cautioned early on that the procedure wasn't guaranteed and kept expectations at bay, it wouldn't have lost the credibility it did when "top kill" itself was



killed.

Again, despite the non-stop criticism the company has received for practicing pitiable public relations, BP has tried admirably to be candid and transparent in dealing with a terrible situation.

But primarily due to committing two cardinal crisis management sins in the midst of history's most catastrophic oil spill, BP has ensured its place forever in the Public Relations Hall of Infamy.