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Editorial: A good source is hard to find

By: Merle R. Snyder



Journalistic sources are much in the news today, and not surprisingly, since a judge has sent journalist Judith Miller to jail for refusing to divulge a source. Miller identified in print the name of an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency and refused to divulge who gave her the information. The case is fraught with bizarre complexities too extensive to address here, but the imprisonment is on grounds of civil contempt, which is to say, not a crime. The sentence prevails only as long as the current grand jury is convened, in this case probably until October, but possibly longer.

A grand jury, by the way, gets to decide whether the local district attorney, who serves as the chief government prosecutor, is allowed to press charges in a given case. It is not difficult to get a grand jury to go along with a prosecutor's wishes. It is established lore in legal circles that a grand jury would indict a ham sandwich.

In another high profile case involving a highly important source, the "Deep Throat" of the Watergate era turns out to be former FBI Deputy Director W. Mark Felt, age 91. He has finally come out of senior-citizen obscurity to collect his fame, or notoriety as the case may be. His family may make a fortune via publication of a book related to the case, if Felt is able to tell his story before he shuffles off this mortal coil. He reportedly has had a stroke and for health reasons may not be as good a source now as he once was.

"Deep Throat" was ironically named after a pornographic movie of the early 70s, and the phrase probably became immortalized by the Watergate scandal more than it ever would have been in just another porn flick.

But whether in highly charged political matters, or in prosaic technical journalism, all writers need their sources. One seldom-heralded way of developing good sources is to go through the public relations firms retained by many companies.

I know of instances where plastics journalists consider PR people to be incompetent flacks. There are certainly some examples to support that view, but in general I do not agree. Yes, PR people operate in favor of their clients. But the good ones can, and figuratively do, stand on their heads to find an editor the right person to talk to. If their sources are biased, so what? The only bias that is a problem is the bias that you cannot identify and take into account.

There are good people doing PR in this industry, and they usually labor in invisibility, but I am about to name names and blow their cover. My personal honor roll of distinguished outside public relations counsel includes, alphabetically (drum roll here), the list at right.

To our knowledge, these are all independents, or were for much of the time we have been working with them. They work on behalf of their clients, of course, but they are not employees of their clients.

PR Honor Roll

Jim Allison
 Laura Carrabine
 Barb Castilano
 Scott Collins
 Steve Colvin
 Michael Driehorst
 Carole Firth
 Greg Hannoosh
 Dallas Hull
 Ray Kemble
 Julian Kestler
 Janine Krasicky
 Susan Hunt Levin
 Peggy Malnati
 Bob Martino
 Marty Pottle
 Tom Rankin
 Roger Rude
 Harry Streamer
 Harry Walsh



To also include the distinguished in-house PR counsel, and some of them are excellent, would make this list even longer. We have also not included in this particular list members of the Asian and European PR communities. **PM&A's** circulation is predominantly North American, and one has to draw lines somewhere.

People should not take offense if they are not on this list—it's possible some will take offense because they are on the list. Memory, mine anyways, is dangerous, both in what it discards, and what it retains. I do not mean to be maudlin here, but one distinguished occupant of our memory is not on the above list. Noel Olivieri, of Olivieri Communications, was taken from us way too early, in 1998, by brain cancer. He is gone but not forgotten.

Gallery of Greats

On p. 14 is an unrelated list of sources, with photos, of industry notables who have put themselves and their companies on the line with insight and commentary on business and technical issues of the day in our "Words of Wisdom" format. We appreciate their participation. I have warned them that their photos may be cut out and used on somebody's dartboard, but it doesn't seem to bother them.

And, of course, on this occasion of our 75th issue, we want to thank our readers. There wouldn't be any magazine without them. We will endeavor to continue serving your technical and business interests in the realm of plastics processing. Should we fall short, we fully expect to hear about it.



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Editor

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