

I'm really sorry. Unless I'm not

Posted At : July 22, 2011 1:43 PM | Posted By : Mike McGrail

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Public apologies as an art form need a serious overhaul because they have a very fundamental problem. No one believes them.

Look at what just happened to Rupert Murdoch. The tabloid baron apologized in person to the family of a British murder victim whose voicemails were hacked by his reporters. The family's lawyer said the family believed Murdoch was "very humbled and very shaken and very sincere." Unfortunately for Murdoch, no one else seemed to believe him.

Poke around the blogosphere and you'll find a lot of comments along the lines of "Murdoch's just sorry he got caught." When even the victim's family can't vouch for an apology, you know the art form is really in a sorry state.

Murdoch's is just the latest public apology to fall flat. Tiger Woods, BP, Charlie Sheen, South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Chris Brown and John Edwards are just a few of the celebrities whose recent apologies went over like day-old road kill.

Those of us in the PR industry need to take notice because the odds are that we're going to have to help a client apologize for something, someday. If the apology is tanking as a form of public contrition, our repertoire of tools is severely limited. So here's a suggestion for rebooting the public apology. The next time a client is in the broth and needs your help saying they're sorry, try asking them this question: "Are you?"



No, seriously. How often does the person in the fix reflexively bark, "sorry, sorry, sorry!" without really understanding what they should be sorry for? That's a big part of why people don't believe apologies.

How much more credibility would a company or an individual have if they said something along the lines of: "I stepped in it big time. I understand that what I did or said caused a lot of people pain and loss. But right now, I only understand that on a factual level. Before I can sincerely apologize, I need to spend time with the people I have offended to learn why I thought I could disrespect them in the first place. I need to hear directly from them how my actions affected them. I've asked and they've agreed. At the same time, I have to examine the thoughts, feelings,

prejudices and blind spots that got me into this mess to begin with. When I figure them out, I can ask for forgiveness with humility and a true awareness of the damage I have caused. I expect to be standing in front of you again soon, able to offer the people I have injured an apology that comes from understanding and genuine regret.”

Apology purists will argue that this isn’t an apology. Okay, it’s not. It’s a promise of an apology, with the apologist publicly putting themselves on the hook by setting high expectations. They’re showing a willingness to learn, not just go through the motions. It’s a high-risk PR strategy, but how much more risky is it than an apology that no one believes?

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