Big Three? Try three ring circus, with extra clowns

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The Big Three automakers' first congressional appearance was the Sistine Chapel ceiling of public "gotchas," a magnum opus in nose tweaking and point scoring. There sat the GM, Ford and Chrysler bigfeet, asking the congressional panel for a multi-billion dollar bailout while they fumbled question after question about their travel fetishes and salaries. The longer I watched, the more the hearing turned into a Warner Brothers cartoon in my mind. The congressmen, in the Bugs Bunny role, kept handing sticks of Acme dynamite to Messrs Waggoner, Mulally and Nardelli. The execs accepted them, fuses sizzling, and looked just as crestfallen as the Tasmanian Devil and Wile E. Coyote when the TNT actually exploded in their faces.

Take **Richard Waggoner** and **Alan Mulally**, for example. They completely muffed a zinger from Rep. Peter Roskam, R-Ill., when he asked if they'd work for $1 a year as a symbolic gesture. (Nardelli is doing so at Chrysler.) Given a chance to poke fun at themselves, or at least show their eagerness to share the pain, they replied with microwaved corporate boilerplate. Waggoner, GM's $15 million dollar man, said he "doesn't have a position on that today." Mulally, at $21.7 million from Ford, said he is "okay where I am."

Okay? At $21 million, and attempting to dip the public till, he says he's "okay" with a $21.7 million salary. Alan, rewind: you earn more than my town's annual budget, but you are asking for several billion dollars in taxpayer money. Dick, baby, you "don't have a position" on your $15 million pay envelope? Here's a position for you both: take the bait. Guys holding out their hands to the feds need to show humility and some sense of symbolism's importance. Symbolism was the whole hearing's point. It was the American auto industry's chance to demonstrate that it had found religion about fuel-efficient cars and more sensible cost structures. It was their chance to talk about new technology and its role in securing our energy future. It was a chance to restore faith in the industry's ability to save itself if it gets the breather it is asking for.

Instead, the execs showed a tin – if not titanium – ear for public perception. Their failure to answer the "gotcha" lines betrayed a lack of preparation that further betrayed an underlying arrogance. "Even if we're clowns, you have to give us the money," they seemed to think. "We're too big to fail." Waggoner, Mulally and Nardelli wised up a little after their public chain whipping. They're driving hybrids to the next Congressional hearing instead of flying, and Waggoner and Mulally are warming to the idea of working for a symbolic salary. But it's too late. The first stop on the Big Three Bailout Tour 2008 should join the **Exxon Valdez** in case studies of lousy corporate PR. In the final analysis, no bailout is going to work unless more people are willing to buy American-made cars. The cars have to be worth buying, which means the public has to believe in the companies making them. After watching the Big Three's performance, I wouldn't buy sunglasses from them in the Sahara, and I bet I'm not alone.