

Silence

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I've worked with a number of individuals who were reluctant to talk to the media. They knew the benefits of doing so, but they also knew the dangers. The dangers loomed larger in their minds. Some, however, preferred the shadows. They were clients briefly or in some cases, not at all, because they could not bring themselves to discuss their work, organizations, issues of the day or anything else. Several had plenty to say but they did not want their views aired in newspapers, on television or radio or in a web site or blog. To them, the "silence is golden" has meaning. Silence allowed them room to maneuver that they would not have if they were more open. Their views were similar to secret departments of government – the CIA, the NSA, intelligence units in the Pentagon, Delta Force soldiers – all of whom disappear and avoid surfacing even accidentally.

Although I have practiced media relations for decades, I understand the decision to remain silent. There is no rule that one has to talk to – or even relate to -- the media. Mystery is an effective public relations tool that sometimes has more value than transparency. One does not reveal proprietary research, plans and products to the world until they are protected and/or executed. Moreover, the condition of not knowing can provoke responses from competitors and others that tie up their resources. Their fearfulness drives them to protect things they would normally not be concerned with. Wariness is energy consuming, and ignorance is stressful. In the best of conditions, silence leads to a void in understanding among outsiders and competitors. That is, competitors haven't asked the questions or considered events that could blindside them. Silence leads to surprise. Surprise leads to confusion, confusion to fear and a breakdown in discipline followed by destruction. Hannibal at Cannae and General Robert E. Lee at Fredericksburg are two examples of what happens when soldiers are surprised.

In the commercial world, surprise happens less often but it does occur, especially when a product or service changes an industry. More frequently, however, surprise comes from underestimation – or, in moral terms, willful ignorance. One doesn't want to know what

he doesn't know. Print media failed to account for the impact of the internet. Publishers knew it was there but they ignored its effect. Their surprise was the speed of the internet and web in reaching universality. So too, the impact of personal computers on typewriters, e-mail on postal mail, TV on radio, movies on vaudeville, cars on the carriage trade, airplanes on rail and sea travel. These are examples, however, where there was plenty of commentary about the potential impact of a new technology. Typical business examples in which there is silence is a purchase or sale of a company, the departure and/or appointment of a new CEO, the forging of a new commercial agreement with a supplier or competitor, intelligence gathering and the development of a new product, process or service. In these cases, silence prevents speculation and permits competitive advantage.

Executives who choose silence because they prefer to be unknown are less common but by no means rare. I have met CEOs who like to walk down busy streets and not be recognized. Their lives are simpler as unknowns. They feel protected from those who might take advantage of them or harm them. These executives don't give speeches in public venues, never appear on TV, are out of site at trade shows and rarely engage in charitable activities where media are present. Their absence from public life might be remarked by competitors but for the most part, few take notice.

What they need to guard against are events and individuals that would turn a spotlight on them and silence against them. If there is a major accident, an investigative reporter, a highly publicized lawsuit or something else that raises awareness, they might be dragged unwillingly into the open. But, even then individuals can remain nearly invisible. Years ago, in a spectacular accident, an Amtrak passenger train traveling at 90 mph broadsided an oil truck at an unmarked crossing during foggy early morning hours. The train engineer, the fireman and truck driver died. The hurtling train spewed flaming oil down the tracks for a mile and the tank of the oil truck melted to the ground in puddles of aluminum. I was sent to cover the accident in rural Oklahoma. The oil company was – and is – privately owned and secretive, but its managers were on the scene. Not one would talk to me on or off the record. The company officially wasn't there, although

there were at least five officials present. And, the company maintained invisibility. The accident was downplayed in the conventional press and forgotten. This firm would not have spoken if its exploding refinery lit up the skies of a city. Even today, with a more public profile, its activities are largely unknown. In another case, a real estate magnate in New York City who had always kept a low profile had one story written about him in more than 30 years. That came from a reporter who sat in his waiting room for three days until the magnate broke and agreed to talk. I have seen no other story about the magnate since that time more than 15 years ago.

The wonder is that such people can thrive without the media paying attention. One would expect concentration of wealth would attract attention, but it doesn't necessarily. On the other hand, once visible, it is hard for individuals to disappear. Howard Hughes was a high-profile playboy who went silent and but was never able to squelch speculation about himself. The invisible must reconcile themselves to a constant life of privacy, to vigilance in keeping their names and activities out of the media. They don't give money to universities to have buildings named after them. They don't endow academic chairs. They don't build hospitals with the name of their foundation over the door. They refuse to be identified as boosters of any issue, activity or organization. That is not easy to do because nonprofit organizations especially want people to know who backs them. Transparency is part of their marketing, and they are used to flattering the wealthy as a way of compensating them psychically for their money. And, it is natural for individuals to want recognition. However, the silent choose to remain out of sight.

It is hard to know how many of these individuals exist at any one time because there is no good way to identify and count them. In decades in the PR business, I have crossed paths with a few, far fewer than CEOs and others seeking publicity. On the other hand, the silent make efforts to avoid PR practitioners. More difficult for the silent are those who thrust into a public role who choose to keep information about themselves hidden. They might be seen in newspapers columns, be interviewed on TV, be discussed in blogs and online forums but no one knows whether they are married or not, if they have children, what their likes or dislikes are, where they might be going or from whence they have

come. It takes rigorous discipline to keep that kind of privacy in the public eye and an ability to parry even innocent questions.

Those who remain silent reconcile themselves to being mistrusted initially by those who rub against them in daily affairs. It takes interaction to build trust – that is, allowing oneself to be known on a selective basis. The silent may have a wide circle of business and personal contacts but never a friend in the media. They may join clubs, golf courses, fraternities, societies and yet, keep their names out of member newsletters. They may travel the world for business and pleasure and hobnob with heads of state but only in closed rooms and in private conversations. Their influence may be extraordinary and yet, remain unseen. It is easy to become paranoid about the silent, as if they are arch-villains of comic books and action movies, but fears are too simple. The silent can do great good or great evil or nothing at all. One must take the time to discover and evaluate their actions, which, of course, is difficult to do. So, activists inveigh against unseen hands steering society and journalists try to find and out them, but the silent remain invisible. From a media relations perspective, there is little one can do for the silent other than to parry questions and refuse to allow reporters near them. Media relations are not an instrument of transparency but of obfuscation. It goes against everything we are taught in PR, but there is no way to change it until the silent choose to do so. It is a reminder that in nearly every discipline there are exceptions to principles and rules.

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