

THE DEVIL YOU SAY

Poets and other men of letters have, down through the years, rallied to the defense of what is commonly referred to as a person's "good name" .. You can go all the way back to the Book of Ecclesiastes, for example, where it is noted that "a good name is better than precious ointment". The 1st century Roman philosopher, Publius, stated in his "Maxims" that "a good reputation is more valuable than money". And, of course, Shakespeare had something to say on the subject and did so in Othello, Act III, Scene 3, when Iago says to Othello:

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, is the
immediate jewel of their souls;
Who steals my purse steals trash;
'Tis something, nothing;
Twas mine, twas his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed."

Most legal systems recognize the importance of a person's good name and have developed or enacted laws of libel and slander to protect it. Corporations, created by legislation during the 19th century, were endowed with the fiction of "personality" and are able in most jurisdictions in this country to avail themselves of these same legal protections.

There have been several instances in recent years of American businesses which were subjected to vicious attacks by rumors so preposterous as to challenge believability by anyone with a grammar school education. One of the more notable ones concerned the MacDonalds Corporation. They endured an unfounded story_ for years that their hamburgers consisted in part of ground"up worms. I understand it occasionally resurfaces even today.

Another example was the story about a cat that wandered into a microwave oven and exploded when its careless owner turned the oven on. This juicy tale emerged about the same time that microwaves were coming into extensive use and probably led some people" cat fanciers, in particular " to question the wisdom J of having such a dangerous appliance in their homes.

Actually, the history of this country is replete with instances of malicious rumors - spread by so-called "good people" - which had tragic consequences for the targets of the rumors and the "good people" alike. A society capable of persecuting and killing dozens of innocent women rumored to be witches - as happened in Salem, Massachusetts - is, I suppose, to the cynics among us, capable of virtually anything. My purpose is not to preach to you about the basic imperfections of man, however, but to explore the anatomy of one particular rumor with which I have some familiarity by virtue of my 33-year career in Procter & Gamble's Legal Division.

In the autumn of 1979, Procter & Gamble began to receive telephone calls and letters from consumers asking about the similarity of our corporate "Moon and Stars" design to what they claimed were symbols of the "church of satan". No one seemed to know if there really is a "church of satan", but there was indeed a "Moon and Stars" design which was used by the Company on many of its publications and which had appeared on packages of its products as far back as the 1850's. It featured a circular

representation of a crescent "man in the moon" overlooking a field of 13 stars; these 13 stars, according to company lore as to how the design originated, represented the original 13 colonies. The "man in the moon" figure was a popular design frequently seen during the mid-nineteenth century. I'm going to flout club traditions which discourage use of visual aids and show you this copy of the "Moon and Stars" design. It will be at the podium if you wish a closer examination at the conclusion of the paper.

We were never sure just what triggered the connection between our time-honored trademark and the so-called "church of satan" or, indeed, where the rumor originated. These are perhaps immaterial questions anyway since one of the things we learned from this experience is that it's not very useful to waste time on the origin of a rumor once it's taken on a life of its own.

For most of 1980 and 1981, the rumor had a rather amorphous form. It was, in fact, often intertwined with another rumor involving P&G which was going around at that time, namely, that the Company was owned by followers of a charismatic Korean minister by the name of the Rev. Sun Moon - the "Moonies" as they were called. Fortunately, this rumor faded away rather quickly - along with news about the good Reverend himself. But calls about the "satan rumor", mostly of an inquiring nature, continued to come in at the rate of 200-400 per month during most of this 1980-81 period. The Public Relations Department - under whose oversight their responsibility for handling the matter fell - took a very low-key profile. This was in line with the approach taken by other companies who had been plagued by similar rumors - the theory being that ignoring the rumor would ultimately result in its death by natural causes.

For some reason, that didn't work in our case. In late 1981, the pace began to pick up. More disturbingly, the rumor began to crystallize into two parts:

- (1) That our president had appeared on a television talk show - Phil Donahue was the one most commonly named - and had stated that a large portion of the Company's profits go to the "church of satan"; and
- (2) In return for this, P&G was permitted to place the symbol of the "church of satan", i.e. the "Moon and Stars" design, on its labels.

Crude leaflets containing these thoughts began to be circulated by people, and thanks to the availability of copy machines, the rumor began spreading across the U.S. like wildfire. Many of the leaflets embellished what I'll call the basic rumor and, in order that you may get the full flavor of a typical one, I'll read it pretty much in its entirety. It's addressed "To All Christians" and goes on:

"The President of Proctor & Gamble Co. recently appeared on the Phil Donahue Show. The subject in which he spoke about was his company's support of the Church of Satan.

The President stated that a LARGE portion of Proctor & Gamble's profit goes to the church of satan, also known as the devil's church.

When asked by Mr. Donahue if he felt that stating the materials on T.V. would hurt his business, the President replied, "THERE IS NOT ENOUGH CHRISTIANS IN THE UNITED STATES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE"

The President of Proctor & Gamble was contacted by the President of the church of satan, and notified that if he was going to support the church of satan, the Proctor & Gamble would have to place the emblem/symbol of the church organization on the labels of each Proctor & Gamble product.

All Proctor & Gamble products now have the symbol of the church of satan on their labels. It could be on the front or back. Christians should remember that if they buy any products with this symbol, they will be taking part in the support of the church of satan!"

The leaflet contains a fairly complete list of P&G products and a crude sketch of the "Moon and Stars" design. On many of the leaflets, some imaginative people employed the old "connect the dots" technique to show that if you drew lines connecting the stars in a certain way, you could come up with three sixes, the "Mark of the Beast" as set out in the Book of Revelations. Of course, they could as easily have produced three two's or three three's had they been so inclined.

In a refinement of this "Mark of the Beast" theme, some folks professed to see three sixes hidden among the curlicues of the "Man in the Moon's" beard - but only if you held a mirror up to the design. This seemed to be carrying imagination to ridiculous extremes.

In November, 1981, we had received 539 calls concerning the rumor many of which were critical of the Company's "satanic connection" and threatened to stop buying our products. By January, 1982, this figure had jumped to 4600 calls, an eight-fold increase. Clearly, it was time to come out of the closet and attempt to counter the rumor. Since the majority of calls in the early going were coming from the West Coast, Public Relations, in January, 1982, made a mailing to the media there explaining the origins of the "Moon and Stars" trademark and denying any substance to the rumor. A small brochure was supplied which illustrated the evolution of the trademark and emphasized that it had been registered as a trademark with the U.S. Patent Office in 1882.

At the same time, a letter was obtained from the Phil Donohue talk show stating that no Procter & Gamble executive had ever appeared on the show to discuss satanism or the P&G trademark and, as a matter of fact, that no P&G executive had ever appeared on the show to discuss anything. We got good coverage on the West Coast as a result of these materials and calls slackened for a month. But, as calls from the West Coast declined, there was a literal explosion of them elsewhere. From March to May, 1982, calls jumped from 3200 to 13,000 per month.

And it wasn't just calls. Our sales people, particularly those calling on the small mom-and-pop stores in rural areas, often found themselves in the front lines of the controversy. There were reports of their being challenged to fist fights in store parking lots; of their tires being slashed or deflated; and, in general, of their being treated with distrust and contempt. One salesman's 9-year old son even experienced the taunts of his school classmates that his father worked for the devil.

Some of these small stores took all our products off their shelves and told our salesmen to remove them from their property. One notable such incident occurred in Missouri and one of our silver-tongued sales supervisors took upon himself the task of trying to straighten out the storekeeper, an elderly woman. He explained carefully to her the origins of the "Moon and Stars" trademark and that the statements made in the leaflets being circulated were baseless. Upon completion of his extensive presentation, the storekeeper said, "My preacher said you'd say that," turned on her heel and walked away. That will give you some idea of the mind-set we were confronting.

As an aside, I had an involvement with the rumor which will illustrate how it spread so rapidly across the country. It began with a call from my mother - at the office -

asking somewhat timorously about P&G's connection with the devil. When I calmed down sufficiently to ask where she had picked up that little nugget, she told me that the mother of one of her daughters-in-law had called - in tears - to ask how a nice boy like me could be involved with the devil. (Actually, having lived with me for so many years, Mother probably had good reason to suspect it might be true!) But, after setting her straight, J asked her to do the same with her informant and to find out where the latter had gotten her information. It turned out it had come to her via a telephone call from a Cousin in West Virginia, who had, in turn, heard it during a visit to Nashville. It makes you appreciate the wonders of our mobile and electronically-connected society.

All states were involved in the "explosion" of calls, but those from the Southeastern states - often referred to as the "Bible belt" - were heaviest. Media mailings to these states were ruled out because it was believed they would simply result in more stories about, and more credibility for, the rumor. Instead, a mailing was made to 48,000 Southern churches in April and May, 1982, asking the assistance of pastors to set their parishioners straight on this ridiculous rumor. It's difficult to know whether this did any good because calls in June hit 15,000 and Company management concluded stronger medicine was needed.

Accordingly, in mid-June, 1982, a task force consisting of Public Relations, Corporate Security and Legal Division representatives was formed with a mandate to explore new ways to deal with these spreading the rumor. Simultaneously, it was decided we should take our problem directly to the public in an attempt to see if facts would stop the spread of the rumor. A first press release was issued on June 24, 1982. Primarily, it was built upon statements made by religious leaders of various denominations who attested to the high moral character of P&G, its founders and its employees. The Rev. Billy Graham, for example, provided a letter reading as follows:

"Unfounded rumors have been spread that the Procter & Gamble Company has some connection to devil worship.

Unfortunately, some of these false accusations have been spread in various churches.

These rumors claim that the Procter & Gamble 100-year old trademark with its famous moon and 13 stars representing the 13 colonies has something to do with the supporting of satanism and devil worship. I have found this to be absolutely false. I urge Christians everywhere to reject these false rumors and to be reminded that it is a sin to "bear false witness".

Similar letters were provided by, among others, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the Rev. Donald Wildmon, an outspoken critic of P&G's television shows, and the late Joseph Cardinal Bernadin.

The June 24 press release, while Citing the support of well-known clergy, went further and mentioned the possibility of legal action to stop the spreading of the rumor. To this end, the Corporate Security people, working with the Legal Division, had been engaged in running down some of the early leads which had come to our attention. In late June, efforts focused on a grocery store clerk in Atlanta who had passed a leaflet on to one of our sales representatives, and on a couple in Pensacola who had verbally passed the rumor on to at least two of their friends. This couple had a part-time business as distributors of Amway products and were, therefore, competitors of our soap and detergent business.

On July 1, suits were filed in the Federal District Courts in Atlanta and Pensacola against these people. The complaints alleged counts of unfair competition, trade libel, product disparagement and slander; they sought injunctive relief, as well as compensatory and punitive damages. The lawsuits were accompanied by simultaneous press releases to the media.

On July 20, three more suits were filed against a man in New Mexico, a couple in Tennessee and a television weatherman in Atlanta. The situation with the TV weatherman was particularly sad for me. He was a devoted church member and had been superintendant of his church's Sunday school. His standing in the community was very high and he devoted a great deal of his time to visiting retirement homes and speaking to Senior Citizen groups. It was while speaking to such a group that he mentioned the rumor; unfortunately for him, one of the audience was the mother of a P&G employee, who told her son, who told us, and so forth.

I personally found it hard to believe that a man with the savvy to handle a responsible TV job would have anything to do with such a rumor. But, when initially interviewed, he not only admitted talking about the rumor but stated with some vehemence that it was true and that he intended to keep on "spreading the word" about Procter & Gamble's satanic connection.

After some preliminary legal skirmishing, all of these complaints but one were settled by securing the apology of the defendants and by incorporating their agreement never to spread the rumor again into a consent order approved by the courts. The one exception was the couple we had sued in Pensacola. When it became apparent that they had just passed on the rumor they had heard (from a more senior Amway distributor, we dismissed the case against them and filed suit against the "source" instead. We were successful in getting relief from this gentleman, also.

The relief we obtained from the TV weatherman was unique. With the wholehearted agreement of his station, this gentleman went on the air- three times in one day - to state that what he done was wrong and that he would not do it in the future.

Were the lawsuits, and particularly the publicity that accompanied them, successful as part of the campaign to stop the rumor? We'll never know for sure, but it is significant that after the publicity about the first two suits, calls to the Company dropped by 50%. After the publicity about the next three suits, calls dropped to about a quarter of what they had been at the height of the problem. Gradually, they leveled off to an inconsequential number and we thought the problem was over.

It turned out we were wrong. In late 1984, the rumor surfaced again and this time in states other than the South. We again tried to handle the problem through public relations approaches to churches, home economists and so-called "thought leaders". Additionally, in an attempt to remove the basis for the rumor, the Company took the Draconian step of removing the "Moon and Stars" trademark from all its product packages.

These non-legal efforts were not completely successful, however, and in May, 1985, three more lawsuits were filed - one against a couple in Eastern Pennsylvania, one against a part-time minister in Virginia and one against a school teacher in Kansas. Once again, the number of telephone calls dropped precipitately almost immediately after the lawsuits were publicized. By July 1, 1985, the matter was quiescent and we assumed,

although with less confidence than previously, that the struggle was over. It turned out that our lack of confidence was warranted. In the Spring of 1986, another wave of rumor-mongering occurred. This one had no particular geographic pattern - popping up in small areas all across the country.

One particular egregious incident occurred in California where the leaflet that we had encountered so frequently was actually published in a large trailer park's newsletter. We sued - and this time included a claim for punitive damages of \$1,000,000. You can imagine the chagrin of the defendants - particularly the editor, a retired gentleman who was a volunteer. This case, too, was settled - appropriately, I think - without taking any money from anyone. The editor, a terribly decent man, told us he never believed the rumor. It was, he said, such a stupid thing that he thought no one would believe it, so he published it. Peculiar logic, but noworse, I suppose, than the logic employed by those who spread it.

That marked an end to the widespread communication of the rumor; there were still instances where it would crop up in an area, but these were controlled with only minimum resort to the courts. I understand calls still come in to the Company from time to time and, with my jaundiced view of human nature, I doubt that the rumor will die completely so long as there are people alive who remember the "Moon and Stars" trademark.

It might be productive to speculate, in hindsight, what prompted the spreading of this rumor. But first, a word about the people who did so. Almost without exception, they were what we used to call in my hometown "good old souls". They were faithful church attenders and, in many instances, were known for their good deeds within their communities. I wish they had had heavy beards and foreign accents. Unfortunately, they were just middle Americans who you would've liked for neighbors. They would bring you a bowl of soup when you're ill and pick up your children at the airport when you're busy. Just plain "good folks".

So what goes wrong with "good folks" like this? At least one psychologist has explained it by saying that a rumor about satan and his work on earth serves to answer the needs of many people. There are, he says, so many things in our society that just can't be simply or sensibly explained that some people grasp for Simplistic solutions. Satan's presence to them explains why our children are on drugs, why dirty books crop up in school libraries, why teen-agers get pregnant and why the pastor leaves his wife and runs off with a parishioner. These people are receptive to any manifestation of a satanic presence, real or imagined, because it confirms their explanation for the unexplainable.

Frankly, I don't think you need a psychologist's opinion to explain why people spread rumors of this sort. As I see it, it's a titillating break in an otherwise humdrum life; it's a chance to tell people - in an authoritative way - something they didn't know and are probably interested in hearing. That sounds suspiciously like the definition of "gossip", which to my simple mind, was probably what we were confronting all along.

This may be the appropriate time to address the question which perhaps you're asking yourself and which others were asking during the decade-long duration of this matter, namely: Wouldn't P&G have been wiser just to ignore the rumor and let it die in the course of time? That's a fair question and, considering the attention span of most Americans - which seems to average about 30 nanoseconds - it's an approach which

might have worked. But, in view of the exponential rate at which calls increased in 1982, just standing by and doing nothing seemed a dangerous risk for a company which had built a reputation for honesty and decency during the preceding 145 years of business. There probably never will be agreement as to whether or not the tactics adopted by the Company were the right ones. The fact remains, however, that the rumor finally stopped being a matter of significance.

But, there's a postscript I must mention. It involves the Amway Corporation, whose name I've mentioned a couple of times. Amway manufactures and sells a line of household and personal products, some of which are competitive with P&G products. It markets these products through tens of thousands of independent distributors, however, rather than through conventional retail outlets.

Their distribution system has a pyramidal shape. Each distributor can enlist sub-distributors who are independent, but who pay a percentage of their profits to him. In turn, the sub-distributors can recruit others (I guess we could call them sub-subs) and these latter pay a share of their profits to the distributor who recruited them and so on. The initial or senior distributor, through hard work in recruiting other distributors, can over time end up being on top of a large pyramid of Amway product sellers - a portion of whose profits end up with him.

A few of these senior distributors saw the satan rumor as a sales stimulation device and passed it along to their sub-distributors at periodic sales meetings. This was not done because of any religious convictions - as was the case with the people we had sued earlier. Rather, it was a straight-forward case of telling lies about competitors for a business advantage.

A suit was filed against four of these senior distributors in 1995 which ultimately resulted in a multi-million dollar judgement against them in favor of P&G. I want to emphasize that there was no proof that the Amway Corporation itself was responsible for these actions by a few of its distributors who apparently were off on a frolic and banter of their own.

At any rate, the disposition of this case seems to have marked a final end to this whole sorry episode in the annals of American business and, hopefully, it will remain that way forever.

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The literary Club
June 14, 2010