

Marketing ploy backfires on Post

Jennifer Harper | Friday, July 3, 2009

A marketing scheme backfired on The Washington Post on Thursday, forcing the newspaper into uncharacteristic mea culpa mode.

A headline in The Post itself tells all: "The Post's 'Salon' Plan: A Public Relations Disaster."

In an age of excruciating transparency, revelations that the newspaper planned to pair up political insiders, business leaders, Obama administration officials and Post reporters for cozy, off-the-record "salons" at the home of publisher Katharine Weymouth generated immediate, corrosive buzz -- and lots of reaction.

A color publicity flier obtained by Politico revealed that The Post would charge up to \$250,000 for these "collegial" encounters, billed as "extensions of The Washington Post brand of journalistic inquiry into the issues."

The pile-on began. Immediate coverage from news organizations and bloggers took its toll. Within hours, The Post announced that the "policy dinners" were canceled, forcing the newspaper's brass into the spotlight to explain the bungle.

"This should never have happened. The fliers got out and weren't vetted. They didn't represent at all what we were attempting to do. We're not going to do any dinners that would impugn the integrity of the newsroom," Ms. Weymouth said.

"For a storied newspaper that cherishes its reputation for ethical purity, this comes pretty close to a public relations disaster," wrote Post ombudsman Andrew Alexander, identifying newly hired Post events manager Charles Pelton as the man behind the flier.

"There's no intention to influence or peddle. There's no intention to have a Lincoln bedroom situation," Mr. Pelton said.

"Gatherings similar to this 'salon' idea happen all the time. Sometimes a paper gets paid, sometimes not. There are probably better ways to try and generate revenue, though.

"There's distinction between charging for information and charging for access," said Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University.

The Post's strident damage control was on target, said John Tantillo, a Manhattan marketing expert.

"The best response is to admit the mistake, assure everybody it won't happen again, and that there's already an ethical committee poised to investigate the whole thing," he said.

"These kind of things can tarnish the paper. But newspapers are hurting for revenue right now and aggressive marketing happens. I think there's a chance that the editorial side was truly blindsided by the business side," Mr. Tantillo said.

That was the indication, according to an internal Post memo obtained by The Washington Times.

"The language in the flier and the description of the event preclude our participation. We will not participate in events where promises are made that in exchange for money the Post will offer access to newsroom personnel. Our independence from advertisers or sponsors is inviolable," Executive Editor Marcus Brauchli told staffers.

"The newsroom was unaware of such communication. It went out before it was properly vetted, and this draft does not represent what the company's vision for these dinners are, which is meant to be an independent, policy-oriented event for newsmakers," said Post communication director Kris Coratti.

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