

Lessons gleaned from the PR pros in Boise

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - There is a certain sour-grapes snobbishness in the news industry toward our colleagues who trade in their press badges for cushy public relations jobs.

Yes, we're jealous of the better hours, much better pay and less-intense daily pressures we think they enjoy. But we also comfort ourselves with assurances that our constitutionally protected role as public watchdogs is a nobler path. It may never earn us free drinks or adoring looks, but it certainly has more cachet than being an anonymous shill for some agency or special interest group.

That said, the older I get and less I earn, in inflation-adjusted terms, than I did gutting salmon in my college years, the more my resistance wavers.

Fortunately, should I ever sell out and cross the public relations divide, my time at the Idaho Legislature will not have been wasted. The Dark Side skills I've observed here beat anything I could have picked up in grad school.

A few examples from this session:

Lesson One - Keep a straight face

Imagine you're trying to sell a particularly controversial issue - say, allowing concealed weapons to be carried on college campuses.

Now imagine every college and university president in the state opposes the legislation, along with the State Board of Education, the Idaho Chiefs of Police Association, grandmothers, attorneys, physicians, various student body associations, faculty groups and the great-great-great-grandson of Jonathan-freaking-Browning, one of the founding fathers of the American firearms industry.

Tough position, right? But not for the PR pros in this place.

Barely four hours after student leaders delivered 3,000 petition signatures urging defeat of the measure, bill sponsors Sen. Curt McKenzie, R-Nampa, and Rep. Judy Boyle, R-Midvale, struck back. They called a press conference and trotted out some hapless sheriff from Adams County - that hotbed of higher education campuses - who told reporters the "vast majority" of Idaho county sheriffs supported the measure.

He clarified that six sheriffs didn't respond to the survey, so "vast majority" only applied to the 38 who did.

A PR lightweight may think it's absurd to try and counterbalance all the opposition testimony with a survey of barely three dozen people, but the intrepid masters here realize it's all in the presentation: McKenzie and Boyle didn't smirk once during the press conference. They stood there looking serious, expecting to be taken that way.

Yeah, man, "vast majority." 'Nuff said. Let's go pass this puppy.

And that's just what happened.

Lesson Two - Repeat ad nauseam

Now imagine you've been criticized for years about your halfhearted support for public schools. Those pesky Democrats keep whining about the \$58 million in tax relief you approved the past two years. They keep harping about that darn Students Come First plan, which - had voters not rejected it - would have cut the teacher salary appropriation by about \$50 million per year to pay for classroom technology.

To top it all off, the governor's own task force recommended a \$254 million increase in teacher pay, plus another \$83 million to restore discretionary funding.

Well, bother. How do you sell the next big tax giveaway in that environment?

Not a problem: just keep saying "education is our first priority, our first priority, our first priority."

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter has been repeating that mantra for years. He said it again during his State of the State address in January - even though his budget proposal included more than \$100 million for savings and additional tax relief, nearly three times the amount of new money he recommended for public schools.

House Majority Leader Mike Moyle went Otter one better last week, during the floor debate on his proposal to reduce corporate and individual income tax rates by \$125 million over six years.

"This bill is set up to protect education," he said.

Based on historical appropriations, nearly half of all general fund revenues go to public schools - meaning Moyle's bill, if fully implemented, would actually reduce the funding available for education by about \$60 million per year.

The House voted 55-13 to support the legislation. Only one Republican voted against it.

Lesson Three - Act surprised, then act decisive

The first part comes in handy when your party has been in charge of the state's economic policies for 20 years and Idaho "suddenly" slips below Kentucky, then Arkansas, then West Virginia, then Mississippi in terms of average wages, per capita income and a half-dozen other measures.

The second part is useful when your administration drops a surprise \$14.5 million request on lawmakers to salvage the Idaho Education Network school Internet service. Nine months after you first learn there's a problem, tell the budget committee to get off the dime and do something, then issue a news release saying you're taking steps to ensure the service isn't disrupted.

As impressive as these lessons have been, the Legislature's finest PR hour may come next week, when it will likely adjourn.

Here's the problem: Even before the session started, the majority party's willingness to tackle important issues was called into question by the governor's unintentionally candid admission that the big challenge this year is "getting me re-elected."

The push to make this the shortest session since 2004 compounds that impression, particularly when lawmakers have ducked topics as varied as transportation funding, gay rights, medical indigency, public safety, tax fairness and the Medicaid coverage gap.

So, how will Republican leaders make leaving town as fast as possible seem like it's actually in the public's interest, rather than their own?

I can't wait to see how they pull this off - but you can bet whatever they come up with, they'll say it with a straight face, repeat it ad nauseam, and it will blow your mind.

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