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**TALKING POINTS**

# Press One To See If You've Got A Job

By Andrea Obston

**“Y**our greatest asset goes down the elevator each night.” So said the great philosopher and “father of advertising,” David Ogilvy. He was a man who built a worldwide agency on the idea that his people were his company’s greatest competitive advantage.

The sentiment’s not new — he wrote it in his 1963 book *Confessions of an Ad Man*. Nor is it unique. Powerhouses like Starbucks and Johnson & Johnson have also built their companies on it.

But it must be news to someone. I say this because of a recent news story that came across my screen showcasing the most appalling case of employee abuse ever.

It seems drug maker Sanofi-Aventis needed to do an extensive layoff — over 75 percent of its workforce. The method of delivery was voicemail. That’s right — voicemail. If you were one of the 1,700 who was being laid off, you found out about it over the phone.

Here’s how one of the laid off workers described the process to the Huffington Post: Right before their Thanksgiving break, employees of Sanofi-Aventis pharmaceuticals, the world’s fourth-biggest drug maker, received an e-mail from the company wishing them a happy Thanksgiving and telling them to check their e-mail again at 5 a.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 2. On that day employees received one of two e-mails. Both contained a code, an 800-number and a call time, either 8 a.m. or 8:30 a.m. The employees who called in at 8



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a.m. got good news — they still had jobs. But the 1,700 employees who called in at 8:30 a.m. got a very different message. In that phone call they found out they were being laid off and that they were to stop working immediately. Soon afterwards someone from an outside company hired by Sanofi-Aventis came to collect any company issued items.

How would you like to be the person who drove to work that day, in your company car? You get a phone call that says you have no job; you get no explanation of the reason; you get no opportunity to ask questions and you get to walk home to add insult to injury.

One of the laid off workers told the Huffington Post: “The way they did this was so brutal and inhumane. We were each assigned an employee number when we started working there ... and that’s how I felt that day. [I felt] Like a number, rather than a valued human being with feelings.”

Jack Cox, the senior director of media relations for Sanofi-Aventis, acknowledged that “delivering this news in a teleconference wasn’t ideal, but given the scope and scale of the reductions, there was no other way to share this news quickly and consistently.” That’s like saying the BP Oil spill wasn’t an “ideal” outcome of off-shore drilling.

In the field of crisis communications, we often say that a company’s true nature comes out during a crisis. It certainly did in this instance. Obviously, someone decided that the people who researched, created and sold their drugs were an expendable commodity. Why else would they treat them that way?

I’d be willing to bet if they do outlast the downturn that they’ll have a heck of a time getting anyone to work for them.

And what does this say to the 500 remaining employees? Under normal

circumstances, those left after a lay-off end up with “survivors’ guilt.” Do they have an incentive to do their best for a company that’s demonstrated they consider their employees about as disposable as the plastic pill bottles that hold their meds?

I understand that laying off workers is never easy. I’ve been on the receiving and giving end of that equation, and it’s terrible. But I do believe that there are ways to do it that don’t involve treating employees like they are throwaway commodities. When I work with clients in this difficult situation, here are some of the principles I suggest:

- Explain that this was a difficult decision; that you didn’t make it lightly;
- Outline the business reasons why you had to make the decision;
- Deliver the news face-to-face and give them the courtesy of allowing them to vent their feelings;
- Provide them with resources to rebuild their lives and careers;
- Support the survivors, acknowledging that they’ll have to do more and that they are valued for taking that on.

In my book, it boils down to understanding that no matter what you make, whether it’s Plavix® or peppermint mochas, that it is the people who make it and make it better. That means more that calling them “dedicated professionals” on a website. It means treating them as the most important asset you have. ■

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