

Are you a Hollywood titan whose reputation is in tatters? Better call Sitrick

When all hell broke loose for Harvey Weinstein, he rang Michael Sitrick. Now the man who buries bad news for the A-list has walked away. By **Helena de Bertodano**

Now. You got a corpse in a car, minus a head, in a garage. Take me to it," says Winston "I solve problems" Wolfe in one of the most memorable scenes in the movie *Pulp Fiction*. Wolfe takes one look at the blood-spattered vehicle and comes up with a plan: "... take the body, stick it in the trunk... Scoop up all those little pieces of brain and skull... The pools of blood that have collected, you gotta soak that shit up."

Michael Sitrick, who has been nicknamed the Winston Wolfe of public relations, chuckles. "The analogy is great. I clean up the corporate messes, whereas [Wolfe] cleans up the blood and gore." Indeed, there is rarely a mess that is beyond the Los Angeles-based spin doctor's capabilities. Over the past few decades he has not only been soaking up corporate blood pools, but attending to what he calls "the celebrity crisis business": famous people in potentially career-devastating trouble.

Several of those people we will never hear about because Sitrick's slick cleaning operation is so effective as to keep the story out of the news. With others, though, it is a case of mitigating damage. Kelsey Grammer, the star of *Frasier*, turned to him when

he was accused of having sex with his underage babysitter (a grand jury refused to indict him due to lack of evidence); the actress Halle Berry when she was in a hit-and-run accident; the singer Chris Brown after he was arrested for assaulting his girlfriend Rihanna; the model Naomi Campbell when she was accused of assaulting her housekeeper. Sitrick takes the mess, spins it and presents it in its most palatable form — with his help, the public image is only dented, not destroyed.

So it was not surprising that Sitrick was the first person Harvey Weinstein thought of when he found himself capsizing under allegations of sexual misconduct last October. The timing was not great. On October 7 Sitrick's mother died. On the same day Weinstein's lawyers rang, then the man himself. "I said, 'I can't deal with this now. I'm making my mother's funeral arrangements,'" Sitrick says.

However, he was able to offer Weinstein the help of his right-hand

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woman, Sallie Hofmeister, a highly respected former newspaper editor who works at the company. "I said, 'I'm going to put Sallie on it.' He knows who Sallie is. There wasn't any choice. It was either that or we weren't going to take it. It wasn't a matter of, 'Gee, I wanted a woman.' I don't think in terms of male/female."

Did Weinstein sound composed when he talked to him? "Yes, yes," says Sitrick, 71, sitting in his penthouse office in a smart neighbourhood in west Los Angeles. The two men had met several years earlier, but only in passing. Did you like him when you met him? "He was personable," Sitrick replies noncommittally.

Now Sitrick has dropped Weinstein. He can't say precisely why. Is it true that he was unable to pay his bills? "Well, I don't know if he was unable..." Sitrick starts. But he didn't pay them? "I shouldn't comment on the record." Suffice it to say that the two parties are in arbitration. Sitrick knows that I am here because of Weinstein, yet he cannot talk about him.

Could there be other non-bill-related reasons for dropping a client? "If I believe they've knowingly lied," Sitrick says. "I may give them the benefit of the doubt the first time, if we find out facts that have not been disclosed to us... and I'm not talking... this is not about anybody... if there are facts that come out... or we

believe they are hiding facts, those are the kinds of things that would do it."

Sitrick is renowned for his integrity. "The one rule that is not debatable in this firm is 'never lie.' Our credibility is critical." Indeed, he says, spinning should not have negative connotations. "Spin has been characterised as something nefarious... but spinning is an interpretation of the facts. Give me a set of facts and I can give you four stories from the most negative to the most positive."



Left: Michael Sitrick and, below, his former clients Kelsey Grammer and Halle Berry. Above: Harvey Weinstein and Rose McGowan. Far left: Gwyneth Paltrow, Weinstein and Cameron Diaz

reputation. "You can't subjugate your client's interests for your firm's. You have to make a determination: what's the right thing to do?"

His body of work is impressive. Highlights include helping the fashion chain American Apparel to dismiss its founder Dov Charney after allegations of sexual misconduct and Roy Disney to remove Michael Eisner from the chairmanship of the Walt Disney Company. He assisted Exxon after the Exxon Valdez oil spill and came to Enron's aid during its fraud scandal. He represented Riverside County in California

when police officers shot a sleeping black teenager in 1998 and he defended the archdiocese of Los Angeles against child molestation allegations. Sometimes, like Wolfe in *Pulp Fiction*, he literally deals with corpses.

"We had a high-profile case — a CEO travelling with his much younger girlfriend. He went to a meeting and came home and found her lying dead, stark naked, on the bedroom floor of a drug overdose." A *Forbes* journalist was quickly on to the story and the company was advised not to comment. Then Sitrick, who believes "no comment" is almost always a bad idea, was drafted in.

"I said, 'Do you know what the reporter wants?' They said, 'No, but we shouldn't

A client could also be dropped if they mistreat his staff. "If they're abusive to my staff, that's it. I've had a couple of instances where somebody yelled at one of my staff."

He has always had a soft spot for the underdog. As a child growing up in Chicago, he took on a group of boys who had beaten up his younger brother, David, after his father instructed him to "take care of it". "I said, 'Dad, there are five of them,'" Sitrick says. "He said, 'I don't care, fix it.'" So the Sitrick brothers went to the bully's house and while David whacked one of them on the nose, Mike took care of the others. "I stepped in and said, 'You'll have to come through me,' and they backed off."

"Even today," he writes in his book *The Fixer: Secrets for saving your reputation in the age of viral media*, "I know that sometimes you have to punch someone in the nose, figuratively, to get his attention, and when it is necessary in my work, that's what we do."

"I don't like bullies," he tells me emphatically. "I've never liked bullies. I think bullies are cowards."

So if he was representing someone who turned out to be a bully, would he drop them? He gives me a look. "You can't take someone and then say, 'I don't really like him.' It's more complex than that. You're dealing with people's lives. This is serious stuff. You can't drop a client on a whim. If they breach the agreement, you can resign... It's very rare, [it's only happened] a couple of times in the whole life of the firm."

Sitrick, who founded his company in 1989, meets people at their most vulnerable. "More often than not, they're like deer caught in headlights, they just don't know what to do and sometimes they get terrible advice." For \$1,100 an hour, Sitrick will steer them through their crises. Celebrities are often the hardest to deal with. "A lot of celebrities surround themselves with sycophants — nobody wants to tell the emperor or empress they have no clothes. Somebody's got to do that. We do that."

He was not concerned that taking on a client such as Weinstein could damage his

respond.' I disagreed so the chairman [said], 'All right, call her up.' I called her and she had the facts completely wrong. We corrected her both on and off the record. [As a result] the story was benign for the company. Had we not done that, it would have been a major disaster."

Hofmeister says that Sitrick has a sixth sense of what to do in any situation. "There is nothing he hasn't seen. The first reaction I usually have to a client is, 'You're f***ed,'" she says, laughing, "but [Mike] will come up with a strategy."

Sitrick is selective about whom he represents — he turned down OJ Simpson and Michael Jackson. "Would I represent a white power person, an antisemite, an outright racist, a homophobe? Of course not!"

There's no doubt that defending Weinstein was one of his company's toughest undertakings. His accusers include such Hollywood royalty as Gwyneth Paltrow. I mention that some of the statements that Sitrick and Company issued seemed slightly to deride the women who came forward. "I don't recall," Sitrick says. "I wasn't handling that myself."

I read him a statement made by the company on January 30 to a newspaper that published an article about *Brave*, a book by Rose McGowan, one of Weinstein's accusers: "Your piece omitted that Rose says she faked an orgasm while Mr Weinstein was performing oral sex on her. Why? It's misleading to leave out that part that she describes

“I pretended to have an orgasm’ — those are her words

in detail in her book. Can you please update your story to include her full description of the encounter?"

"There's a perfect example," says Sitrick, jumping up from his leather armchair and striding over to his computer to pull up an email.

"This is from Holly [Baird, one of Sitrick's employees]: 'As directed by representatives for Mr Weinstein, I pointed out that portions of Ms McGowan's book that described the alleged incidents were omitted from his initial story. In her book, on page 123, Ms McGowan wrote, 'I pretended to have an orgasm.'" Sitrick breaks off and turns to me: "We're not saying it, it's on page 123, quote" — he raps his hands on the desk and almost shouts the words again, and I get a glimpse of how formidable he can be: "I pretended to have an orgasm." Those are her words, we aren't putting words in her mouth."

He points out that the culture has shifted in the wake of the Weinstein allegations. "Five years ago if there was an accusation of sexual assault or rape, before any media organisation would publish it there would have to be a lawsuit or a police report. Now the corroboration is the victim told a friend — and it doesn't even have to be contemporaneous."

Professionally, it has made his life more complicated, but on a personal level, as the father of three daughters, he applauds the Me Too movement. "If it gets people to think before they act, it will be a good thing."