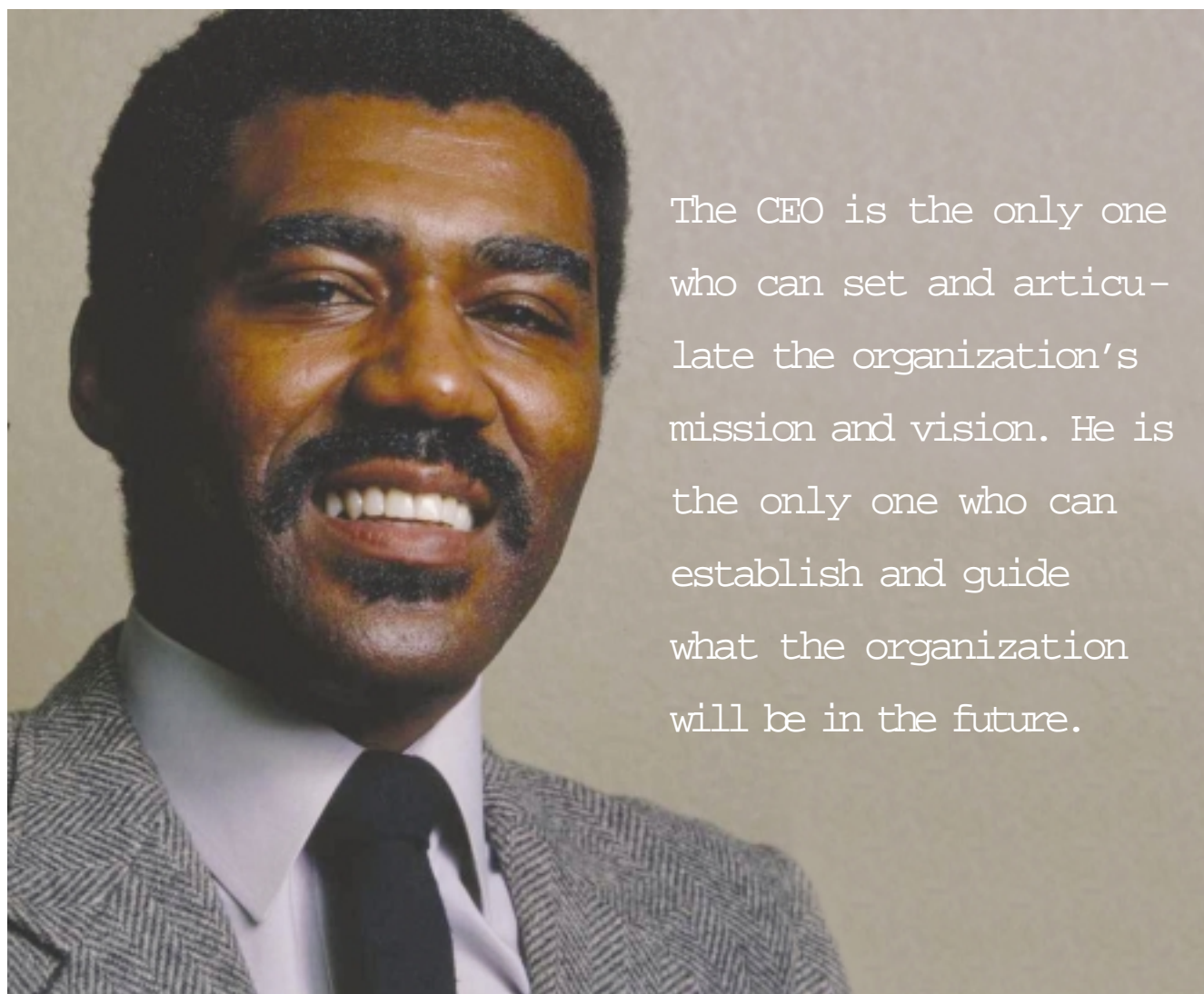


About the Author
G.A. "Andy" Marken is president of Marken Communications, Inc. in Santa Clara, Calif. He may be reached at andy@markencom.com.



By G.A. "Andy" Marken

CEO Still Determines Communications



The CEO is the only one who can set and articulate the organization's mission and vision. He is the only one who can establish and guide what the organization will be in the future.

In the aftermath of 9/11 there has been a flood of articles extolling the good that American business and industry has done and will do. There have been a large number of articles written on the new empowerment public relations and communications people will have as we face a world of uncertainty. The *Public Relations Strategist* had devoted last winter's issue to the new, more influential role public relations will play in business decisions and activities.

We followed the daily soap opera of the HP-Compaq merger. We read the daily barrage of newspaper ads, heard about the countless conference calls, heard the trumped-up predictions, watched the influence peddling with shareholders and followed the personal mudslinging. In April, we heard Carly Fiorina pronounce her resounding defeat of Walter Hewlett's challenge while Hewlett acknowledged possible defeat with dignity.

We also learned that Enron had been constantly "cooking the books" while Arthur Andersen not only looked the other way but also contributed by shredding documents.

The former was a public relations embarrassment while the latter could be considered public relations complicity and collusion.

Public Relations Crossroads

In the midst of this, The *Public Relations Strategist* reprinted John Graham, chairman and CEO of Fleishman-Hillard's comments made at a Legends Luncheon in October. Graham noted, "We are at the crossroads of decision making. Public relations is in the middle of everything... It means we have to rethink the way we approach our jobs. It means we have to reach for a new level of professionalism. It means we have to be ready to face a whole new set of challenges."

We know somewhere there is a PR person or agency claiming bragging rights for the outstanding job they did with Mayor Giuliani, Jack Welch, Lou Gerstner, Bill Gates and the other corporate leaders whose firms placed so well in the Media Reputation Index 2001 Benchmark Study, which was covered in the same issue.

But who is stepping up to say they counseled and guided and crafted the



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PR activities for Ken Lay, chairman, and Jeff Skilling, former CEO, of Enron? Who assisted Joe Brardino, CEO, and Eugene Frauenheim, former Houston managing partner, Arthur Andersen? Who is proud of the strategy of portraying Hewlett as only a musician with no management experience?

Are these strategies and tactics of convenience the way a company wants to be known?

Selfish Survival

Good people or perhaps overachieving and egoistic people do bad things as *Fortune* chronicled in its white-collar crime cover story. Whether you go back to 1920 when Charles Ponzi arbitrated postal coupons; move forward to Charles Keating's collapsed Lincoln S&L and most recently Al "chainsaw" Dunlap's aggressive accounting activities at Sunbeam—you have to wonder if these individuals and other white-collar criminals publicized their schemes solely by themselves.

We agree with Graham that corporate public relations and communications recommendations, efforts and activities take on a new degree of importance both locally and globally. It is going to be interesting and challenging. Even as the SEC and Congress focus on certain "common" business and accounting practices, CEOs like Fiorina are under extreme pressure from business stakeholders to prove themselves.

Public relations and communications practitioners can't supplant the CEO's fundamental ethical standards. But they will have to assume added responsibility of building and managing the company's and management's credibility and reputation by ensuring clear communications internally as well as externally to customers, partners and shareholders.

Fortunately few of us will ever work with a CEO who will face legal action and possible jail time; most of us will work with senior managers who have greater expertise in finance, engineering, manufacturing or sales than in communications. It will be extremely important to help senior management understand why it is important to put a face on the company and that face is the CEO and senior management. It is this face and personality that will bind stakeholders to the company.

The Pattern Returns

While the happenings of 9/11 have had a profound effect on those who lost friends and loved ones, can you view the business landscape now and say that the leadership role of management has fundamentally changed?

The CEO still is the only one who can set and articulate the organization's mission and vision. He is the only one who can shape and articulate the brands, image in a clear, concise manner internally so it can be carried to outside communities. He is the only person who can set the example of how the firm will act, react and interact with employees, business partners, customers and governments. The CEO is still the only one who can establish and guide what the organization will be in the future.

Good CEOs will still do bad things. The difference is the public is better-educated—less tolerant to ambiguity and contrived truth. They expect honest and substantive truth and honesty.

Today corporate communications must quickly and effectively assess the situation and provide positive

counsel and support to the CEO and his actions and words. This determines the value of the function within the company and will determine the success or failure of the organization—and the CEO. **WQP**

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