

## SPOKE SMOKE

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All of us have become casual spokespeople for others at sometime in our lives. As a youth, who hasn't spoken out for another kid, or as an adult, for a family member or a good friend or colleague? Being a spokesman professionally just means a little more training, a little more study of the issues, a little more pressure, a little more often, and the chance to get paid at least a little for doing it.

John D. Rockefeller sort of summed up the business of spokesmanship when he explained, "Next to doing the right thing, the most important thing is to let people know you are doing the right thing."

Over the past half century, I've served as a public relations strategist and spokesperson for the Army, on the staffs of four Fortune 500 companies, for two global PR consultancies, and since retirement, as a board leader and occasional spokesperson for a half dozen not-for-profits. Maybe after tonight at the podium, I'll start cutting back. Just maybe.

Meanwhile, I'll pull back the curtain a little on the smoky world of spokesmanship. I've titled this essay "Spoke Smoke" not because "where there's smoke there's fire," though sometimes there is. The reputation of spokespeople has seldom been stellar, sometimes because they are not good at their job, and sometimes because the content they spout on behalf of others is nonsensical, deceiving or confusing.

As playwright George Bernard Shaw explained, "The problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred."

What personal qualities make a good spokesman? Having the right title? Saying whatever the boss would say? Being theatrical? Not really. No one cares what the spokesman's title is. Though some would like to hear from the chief executive officer directly, others would find a line worker in an organization just as credible. What they want is someone who knows and states the facts. As for content, a good spokesman isn't just a shadow for the boss, he or she needs to be able to have a good grasp of the issues and put management's views in context for the listener. As for theatricality, leave that for Saturday Night Live and the celebrity spokespeople.

Not every spokesperson has the celebrity quality of a Ronald Reagan for GE, nor William Shatner for Priceline or Flo the Progressive Girl, or even the peripatetic Geico gecko. In today's world, a spokesperson should avoid the hype and simply be articulate and sincere.

A recent example demonstrates where a CEO might have better stayed home and let a competent professional spokesperson take the mike, armed with facts and humility. This was the case last April when United Airlines allowed a passenger to be dragged from their seat. United Airlines' stock plummeted after videos of a passenger being violently dragged off an overbooked plane circulated on the Internet. At first, United stood by the forceful removal of the passenger but then issued a cold apology, with the company's CEO saying, "This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers." After intense backlash and

boycott threats, United took full responsibility and finally made the apology that it should have made immediately.

By this point, it was too late for consumers and the public to be appeased. United's consumer perception dropped to a 10-year low following this incident and the company's handling of it. A meaningful company crisis communications plan would have identified that a sincere apology should have been made during the immediate aftermath of the incident. As Warren Buffet says, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation, and 5 minutes to ruin it." U.S. trust in business plummeted by eight percentage points last year, leaving us just five points ahead of Russia, the land of the oligarchs.

There is no larger reputation story than that being played out today at the pinnacle of national politics. It might have started, as the Washington Post reported, when back in the 80s and 90s, Manhattan journalists began to hear from a so-called spokesman for developer Donald Trump named "John Miller" or "John Barron." They were purported public-relations men who sounded precisely like Trump — who in fact was Trump himself, masquerading as an unusually helpful and boastful advocate for himself, according to the journalists and several of Trump's top aides. Fast forward to the Presidential election of 2016, when we became painfully aware of some of the even deeper pitfalls of spokespersonship. A shadowy political operative named Sean Spicer emerged to become a household target of mockery — for many of us, with statements such as, "The President's tweets speak for themselves." His daily performances as White House Press Secretary, were topped weekly by Melissa McCarthy's merciless, yet revealing transgender parodies of him on Saturday Night Live.

We don't know whether Sean Spicer accurately reflected the views of his boss, the T-man, when he persisted with "alternative facts" on the size of the inaugural crowd, made an ignorantly inappropriate Hitler reference and later hid in the White House bushes from the President, among numerous other performances, eroding the image of a spokesperson in the minds of many. It didn't take too long before he lost his job, too. In a Monmouth university poll, 42% of respondents said Spicer hurt the President while only 28% said he helped. As for the President, as Harry Truman said: "All the President is, is a glorified public relations man who spends his time flattering, kissing and kicking people to get them to do what they are supposed to do anyway." Spicer's successor, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, in the minds of some, is even more a parody of a credible spokesperson, raging against the "fake news." Maybe this depends on your politics, but my view is that the personalities of these spokespeople have often gotten in the way of the content, and their loyalties, in this case unfortunately, have gotten in the way of truth. Thanks to them, the reputation of spokespeople everywhere was taken down several notches, from a level that was already not very high. As Abe Lincoln himself put it, "What kills a skunk is the publicity it gives himself."

Back when he was running for President, Dwight Eisenhower tapped James Hagerty, a former reporter for the New York Times to be his press liaison, thus becoming the first full time well-credentialed Presidential Press Secretary. Hagerty had previously served as a press secretary when New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey ran for the presidency.

Hagerty's experience as a journalist and skills in media relations helped him perform his role more effectively. The New York Times' John McQuiston commented that having spent years as a reporter on the other side of the news barrier, helped his credibility.

At Hagerty's first meeting with White House reporters on January 21, 1953, he laid down ground rules that are still largely a model for how a credible press secretary might operate. He said: "I would like to say to you fellows that I am not going to play any favorites, and I'm not going to give out any exclusive stories about the President or the White House.

When I say to you, 'I don't know,' I mean I don't know. When I say, 'No comment,' it means I'm not talking, but not necessarily any more than that. Aside from that, I'm here to help you get the news. I am also here to work for one man, who happens to be the President. And I will do that to the best of my ability."

. Of course, in today's world, what some call "spin" or more currently, "fake news," is meant as an indictment of the news media themselves. I recently saw a photo of a fellow at a 2016 political rally wearing a T-shirt that read "Rope. Tree. Journalist. Some Assembly Required." So perhaps I should not lament so much about the burdens of life of a mere spokesperson. Both spokespeople and journalists can often, these days, hear the refrain, "Don't shoot the messenger," running through their thoughts.

For tens of thousands of spokepeople in all walks of life – celebrity, politics and government, business, sports, not-for-profits, the military, and for the communications media, establishing credibility as a spokesman has become a greater challenge than ever. The concept of "spoke smoke," a term I've invented for the sometimes questionable content of those who speak for others, has increasingly become the image that private citizens attach to the effluence flowing from the mouths of those designated the spokesman or spokeswoman for a cause, a party, a personality, an issue or an event.

"Spoke Smoke" equals "fake news" to many.

The role of those people selected to represent the views and news of others isn't changing, but their generalized public persona certainly has suffered. Let's take a closer look at spokespersonship, what it's all about and how it is changing in today's world of instantaneous communications. While some like to hear from the chief executive office, that's not always such a good idea.

For example: A good spokesperson is vital to any business or organization. Still not sure? Then let's take the well-used example of Tony Hayward who was CEO of BP during the Deep-Water Horizon oil spill in the Mexican Gulf in 2010 where over 87 days the damaged wellhead leaked more than 130 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Not only did Mr. Hayward tell the media that the Gulf of Mexico was "relatively tiny" compared with the "very big ocean," he also commented that he wanted the whole episode to be over, as he would like his life back. He was then photographed racing his sailing yacht in Europe. He showed an apparent disregard for the eleven men who lost their lives when the oil rig exploded and caused the largest accidental ocean spill in history. The lesson, as PR veteran Samra Bufkins put it: "If the public thinks you have a problem, you have a problem."

Tony Hayward showed perfectly how not to do it, becoming in the process the then most hated man in America. He wasn't prepared, he didn't respond to the real issues and worst of all he showed very little sympathy. Mr. Hayward was heavily criticized for his comments about the tragedy and was repeatedly called to step down from his position as CEO. BP managed the whole crisis communications situation so badly that even President Barack Obama said that Hayward "wouldn't be working for me after any of those statements." Hayward was soon replaced as CEO of BP.

The lesson? As historian and professor Daniel Boorstin says, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire public relations officers.”

My first experience as a spokesman was a by-product of a surprisingly successful experiment in college politics, back in the mid-60s. My new college roommate was an old friend from back home who had transferred to Bradley University from the University of Mississippi. He was an articulate fellow who made friends easily, and over a conversation one evening about the new trend towards co-ed dorms, we hatched a plan. He would run for student council president, even though almost no one yet knew him, on a theme that Bradley ought to be more liberal about student rights. I would be his campaign manager, and create the messages, the speaking platforms and the printed materials to support his crusade. He would simply be the face of change.

We lost the election to a more serious, well known and much more deserving student candidate, but the surprising thing to us was that we came in a very close second. The messages I created for him and the communications channels we exploited to deliver those messages almost put us over the top. My undergraduate major was journalism, with a specialty in public relations, and through that election experiment I learned a valuable lesson about the serious power of spokespersonship and the application of the communications tools that surround it. I also learned that PR and spokespersonship could be used for good, but also for not-so-good.

Many people don't realize that at least 50% of news media coverage originates from public relations sources. After all, the news has to come from somewhere, and it's nothing new that news media are chronically understaffed. In today's age of exploding social media taking the place of traditional newspapers and magazines for many, it should not be surprising that editorial and news staffs at major news outlets have been further cut. Steven Colbert's satirical show coined the word “truthiness” to describe something that someone believes without analysis, logic or evidence of support, as is often the case on social media. In this era, public relations people have become even more influential factors in the world of communications.

Here's a CEO who made a big splash as his own spokesperson some years back. He became a pitchman who had a logical reason to convince people to buy a car. Once a Ford executive, Lee Iacocca took the job as Chrysler CEO and decided to speak for the company himself. His famous sales pitch: “If you find a better car, buy it.”

That's some straightforward honesty, and it worked for Chrysler. They were struggling through the early 80s, but Iacocca and his frank TV spots helped the auto manufacturer regain sales and get out of debt. And celebrity spokesman Ricardo Montalban reassured consumers that “rich cordovan leather” awaited them in their new Chryslers.

My real life indoctrination into spokespersonship was a failed bargain I made with the devil himself, during the Vietnam War. I had earned an Army commission after graduation, and had been assigned to the staff of the Army War College, as an operations officer. I really wanted to gain some military experience in public relations, so I applied to the Department of Defense Information School for their officer's career course in public affairs. This is the school where every military service's communications people learn their craft. To be accepted, I had to volunteer to be assigned to Vietnam. I knew that when I graduated, I'd have only 6 months of service commitment remaining. A tour of duty in Vietnam was then one year, so I thought the Army would not even bother to send me over there. I was wrong, and after graduation was promptly assigned to serve as a press escort officer at the press camp closest to the border with North Vietnam.

While at the Information School we had been indoctrinated with the philosophy that our mission was to provide the press with “maximum disclosure with minimum delay.” The reality was that we were directed by higher headquarters to be more helpful as “connectors” between news media people who were friendlier to the government war effort. Our government sometimes had an agenda, and press officers as spokespeople were obligated to that agenda. I was lucky enough to come home safely from Vietnam, but I had learned a valuable lesson about the limits of spokespersonship. About what a later generation would come to know as “spin.”

Back in civilian life it was often just as challenging being a spokesperson. It involved much more than just speaking the words. A spokesperson is first and foremost someone who the top leadership of an organization trusts, and who can be relied upon to reflect both the tone and content of what that leadership wants communicated. A spokesperson must be both a resourceful internal reporter within the organization, but also someone with the judgment and experience to determine where, when, how and what information to present, and who to speak to, and have the presence, loyalty and maturity to handle it all well under pressure.

One of the first professional lessons a spokesperson learns is that a press conference is usually the last choice as a venue to communicate to the news media. Why? One question is: Is the news important enough to attract the press – will anyone want to attend? Second, is the information important enough that members of the press will come out to hear the same things at the same time their news media competition will hear it? Every reporter prefers an exclusive or private interview. And lastly, where to hold a press conference is a big issue. Where and why will the press be willing to turn up? The loneliest podium in the world is the one with no one in front of it. The best way to hold an interview is to meet a reporter eye-to-eye, so personal rapport can be established, and nuance can be communicated. Next preference these days is contact by Skype or phone, for many of the same reasons. Least desirable is by text or email, where nuance is difficult to determine and intent may be confused.

But spokespersonship often takes place in crisis situations, in which events are rapidly unfolding, and something must be said, even with incomplete information or direction. This is where the spokesman is on the spot, and must come through.

Mike Love, who headed public relations in the UK and Europe for McDonald’s for 13 years, had previously served as British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s spokesman. He ominously tells us, “When the voice on the other end of a mobile phone call starts by asking, “are you driving – then you should pull over” you just know this is not going to be good news.”

He continued, “The Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came on the line. I listened. The call was brief, but more than appreciated at such a moment. I mumbled something about unwavering loyalty and everybody doing what needed to be done. A statement would be issued in 30 minutes confirming she had decided not to go forward for re-election in the second round of voting. She had informed the Queen and the Cabinet of her intention and within 30 minutes the public announcements would be made.” Mike was then Mrs. Thatcher’s political agent and his job was to manage the fall-out in her constituency from her announcement that she was stepping down from office.

He spent the next several days giving interviews to local, and then national and international media. He recalls that, for him, was an unusual moment in the spotlight. As a political agent, his main job had been to be a behind-the-scenes person who helped make things happen, who wrote the words

coming from the mouths of others, to organize events and platforms, but not to speak his own words, as he put it. He recalls that similar experiences at a relatively young age were more than great preparation for his later career as a director of international communications for organizations such as McDonald's, Microsoft and British Telecom. Each of those roles involved managing the media relations for high profile issues and crises.

Like me, Mike Love reflects that at McDonald's almost everything in life happened every day somewhere in the world. There was the potential for a crisis almost every day, often requiring counsel from our corporate home office. He observed that crisis media communications work is more often than not concerned with the opposite of proactive consumer and brand PR, and that often no news really is often good news.

Another former associate of mine, Walt Riker, who succeeded me as global spokesperson for McDonald's, was a former newsman who went on to become, for 13 years, press secretary to Bob Dole, long time Senate majority Leader and one-time Presidential contender. Walt comments: "Being a spokesman isn't for the squeamish. It's all about being ready to stand on the firing line 24/7, for good news, for bad news, tragic news or news you can't even imagine. You have to be quick on your feet, creative, deeply informed on the issues, and willing to stand tall even as critics and tough reporters try to trip you up. It is pressure packed, unpredictable and filled with risk. One wrong quote and you will be second-guessed and criticized from every side, including your own. Believe me, there isn't a spokesperson in the world who hasn't made a mistake, or two. In fact, one day, working for Dole, a misquote from me crashed the wheat market."

Walt recalled one night in Orlando, Florida, while working for McDonald's at their global franchisee convention. He stumbled from his bed to the ringing phone. As he said, his job was "to answer that phone, every day, every hour of my seventeen years with McDonald's. I soon heard a familiar company voice, saying 'Walt. This is bad. Jim Cantalupo, who was company CEO, is dead.' " In a few hours, Cantalupo would have been addressing 17,000 enthusiastic members of the global McDonald's family at the brand's global convention. And instead, in a few hours Walt would be addressing reporters from around the world calling to get comments about this staggering and tragic event. For the next three days he answered countless questions but never wavered from McDonald's core message - they were prepared to meet the challenges of this unexpected tragedy. The company had anticipated the eventuality of such an extreme disruption to its business. The board met within hours of Jim's passing, and had elected a new CEO; a smooth transition was already underway and the board was moving ahead, not only with its convention, but also with McDonald's business strategies and leadership in place.

You might wonder why people like Mike Love in the UK and Walt Riker here at McDonald's headquarters, myself and dozens of other senior communications people were needed for what might be described as "just a hamburger company." But keep in mind that McDonald's employs some 1 ½ million people in more than 100 countries and interfaces face to face with 70 million customers, a day, in 37,000 retail locations. Not only does everything, from birth to death, from weddings to mayhem, that happens in human life occur at a McDonald's every day, but the company is also a bellwether of the stock market, one of the Dow Jones 30 Industrials, and one of the best known, most ubiquitous and therefore most controversial consumer brands on the globe. That adds up to a lot of balls in the air.

One of the most challenging balls that were bouncing around and fluttering in the air when I joined McDonald's corporately was the challenge of rebuilding a relationship with the surviving McDonald brother, Dick, who sold out to Ray Kroc in 1960 under a cloud of acrimony and mistrust, and then had no contact with the company for 25 years, until after Kroc's death in late 1984. I joined the company to head corporate communications in early 1985, and was soon assigned to go to work to rebuild the non-relationship with the man whose name was on our door.

For the next 13 years, I folded Dick and his family back into the global McDonald's family, often meeting him at his New Hampshire home, and honoring him through events at the Smithsonian, in Congress, at the Ford Museum, at the site of he and his brother Mac's original McDonald's in San Bernardino, at visits with company leaders and in tons of media interviews. Even the Wall Street Journal featured Dick and me in a front page center story discussing the new relationship. While he and I and our chairman Fred Turner became fast friends over that 13 years until his death in 1998, his family still continues the now ancient feud today, and received 7 million dollars to see their divisive version of the Ray Kroc relationship in last year's Hollywood film featuring Michael Keaton called "The Founder."

Over the years I served as head of media relations worldwide for McDonald's, I didn't carry home a crisis plan each night, but a briefcase filled with phone numbers and later, email addresses. I had on hand all the corporate key contacts, the security people, the medical, legal, political, financial and public relations advisors available to the company, whom I might notify and seek advice from in the event of disaster.

My staff and I never hesitated to wake up or seek out, the CEO, CFO, CMO or even the Board Chairman, if there were an event or development they should know of, or provide direction. One time among many, I had to track down the CEO regarding a critical, urgent question from a prominent publication. He was on vacation somewhere in Mexico, and his assistant had been directed not to bother him under any circumstances. I insisted and persisted, and after I had roused him from a nap by the pool with a call to his private cell number, and received the answer I needed, he said to me, in total sincerity, "Chuck, sometime in the future, I want you to track me down again, to the ends of the earth like you just did, and instead of assaulting me with a horrendous question, just tell me a dirty joke." We laughed.

I'm reminded of another time our CEO Mike Quinlan had a good laugh at my expense. He was warming up a room of key security analysts in New York City, before leading a financial presentation about future prospects for our global company. He commented to the august group, "Sometimes I wonder if you take McDonald's seriously, since our chief spokesman is a clown," referring implicitly to McDonald's mascot, Ronald McDonald. As the crowd snickered, one of the news media people assembled to cover the event in the back poked me, and cajoled, "He must have meant you."

While I did serve as corporate communications officer for the company, my business card also said I served as chief spokesperson for the brand. I was very proud to have been acknowledged that way, as that was back in the day before the most credible spokesperson for many organizations became the lowliest line employee, and before CEOs enjoyed declining credibility.

In a world where companies have more credibility than governments and the news media, communications group Edelman has found only 44% trust the word of CEOs. There has been a

surprising resurgence in trust in technical and academic experts. And while trust in journalists has recently increased in the double digits, trust by the general public in social media and search engines has plummeted in the past year.

Simply telling the truth can sometimes be a challenge while serving as a spokesperson. One old friend, who taught me much about how to communicate for a publicly- owned company, later went to work doing PR and investor relations for a prominent publically traded Florida development company. Management asked him to tell some lies about their growth prospects. He refused, and lost his job. Then one day, I picked up the Wall Street Journal and read about him telling the story of the company's skullduggery, on the front page left column. Revenge is sweet, but I don't think his career ever recovered.

My own career hit the bumps when my working relationship with an investigative journalist turned sour. He covered the food industry for the Wall Street Journal, and had taken issue with the company over concerns raised by some former franchisees and a handful of anonymous sources within the current franchisee ranks and some security analysts. His writing was so inflammatory and inaccurate that we eventually decided only to deal with him in writing, and make our case through other less-biased journalists. It took years, but we finally convinced his editor and publisher to come out to our Oak Brook home office to share a burger, fries and some straight talk with our CEO and myself to clear the air and reset our relationships.

In another situation, I caught a so-called trusted newsperson in their own deception, when my secretary told me the editor of a prominent Chicago business journal had called to ask the birthday of our CEO. It was a seemingly innocent question, but my curiosity was sparked. So I called him back myself and asked what was up. He acknowledged then that he was indeed writing an editorial, claiming our CEO was disconnected with Wall Street, and thus not doing his job. I immediately ran through details of our CEO's recent active schedule of calls and direct meetings with security analysts in New York, some of which I had attended. But the editor ran the critical editorial commentary anyway, as if we hadn't even talked.

A few weeks later, I was speaking to a graduate class in corporate PR at a prominent Chicago university, when a student asked me if I ever experienced unfairness from the news media. I told him the story, and suggested that the editor had acted in a "corrupt" way, because I had given him information that obviated a story line that someone had fed to him, and he had the temerity to run it anyway. My comment about the editor "leaked" because someone in the room with the students reported it to the media, and the next thing I knew, the Wall Street Journal, Business Week and other media were writing about how the McDonald's PR guy had called a high level editor corrupt.

My board of directors compelled me to apologize, assuming a major publication must be placated on such a hot issue. On a flight to New York with the CEO on the company plane, I offered him my resignation. He paused for a second, and then said, "Forget it." I later took the offending editor to breakfast to clear the air, and he asked me why I described him as corrupt. Speaking earlier to a class of graduate communications students, I had explained that I considered him to be intellectually corrupt because he wrote lies when he knew better, just to please one of his regular "sources" who perhaps wanted to short the stock. His reply: he said he could live with "intellectually corrupt." It was then I remembered this adage from media training class: "Criticizing



the news media is like wrestling with a pig. You are going to get dirty and the pig is going to love it.”

Most of those selected as spokespeople have experience and training that prepares them for the role. At McDonald’s we had hundreds of trained spokespeople around the world, dispersed to represent their local nationalities, geographies and areas of expertise.

Before I became McDonald’s chief spokesperson, I had 17 years as a public relations spokesperson with other companies. At Allstate Insurance, I was a company advocate for driver’s education and anti-drunk driver legislation. At Toyota, we promoted car safety. At Baxter Labs, we helped clarify complex medical therapies for the press.

Part of my own self-imposed portfolio at McDonald’s was to maintain more than 100 personal, first name relationships with key business writers, editors, on-air personalities and producers, meeting with them often at their offices around the globe and hosting them at ours, to tell the ongoing McDonald’s story, even when there was no breaking news.

We employed former news people and spokespersonship experts to train our top managers, board members, franchisees and suppliers on how to speak for and represent the business. We conducted these sessions all around the world, in small one-on-one situations to recreate the stress and atmosphere of real encounters with news media and consumers.

One of the most generous compliments I received when I retired was from an Australian, Charlie Bell, then president of McDonald’s Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Africa group, and later global corporate CEO, when he wrote, “You might remember when we met during a media training session. I listened intently to your words of wisdom and those words have served me well. In fact, I’ve built my entire McDonald’s career off what I learned from you.” Despite his hyperbole, the truth is that media spokespersonship training incorporates many of the elements of the kind of strategic “thought leader” training that has benefitted generations of successful organizational leaders in all walks of life.

But, there are also some media spokes-types who are not even people, yet can warm the hearts and convince millions to support their brand. Anheuser-Busch's famous Clydesdales can't use words to sell their product but that hasn't stopped them from selling millions of beers and becoming iconic representatives of the Budweiser brand in the process.

The thumping Clydesdale spokes-horses made their first appearance in 1933 as a gift from the Busch sons to their father in celebration of the repeal of Prohibition. The sight of Busch Sr. and his two sons moved to tears over the gift of Clydesdales inspired the "crying in your beer" phrase still heard in bars around the world to this day.

Since that tear-provoking debut, the champion Clydesdales, most frequently in a six-horse hitch, have appeared in countless commercials, appearances across the country and even alongside U.S. presidents, notwithstanding the current one, in inauguration parades. Marketing author Seth Godin summed it up well when he said, “People do not buy goods and services. They buy relations, stories and magic.”

Speaking of magic, my old friend and PR guru Tom Harris tells the story of the greatest spokesperson who never lived. Back during the Second World War, she was even named the 2nd most popular woman in America, after Eleanor Roosevelt. She was reportedly born in 1921 at a small town mill, later to become General Mills. Gold Medal flour was running a recipe contest, so the ad manager dreamed up a person named Betty to answer the many questions from entrants.

The name was picked because it sounded, “cheery, wholesome and folksy.” The name of a beloved former company director was Crocker, so the invented spokes-baker became Betty Crocker. By the way, Ray Kroc, who bought rights to the McDonald’s brand from the brothers of that name, decided to keep the name for the business McDonald’s, because he felt it sounded like a good All-American name.

I decided the time was neigh to apply for an early retirement, after nearly a quarter century as a McDonald’s spokesman. Over that time, I had negotiated with Coretta Scott King, introduced franchisees to President Clinton on the White House lawn, played the kazoo at Carnegie hall in rehearsals with Lionel Hampton and shot miniature basketballs with a young Michael Jordan. I spoke every day with news people around the globe, cut ribbons at Ronald McDonald House openings, chaired annual shareholder meeting press conferences, launched new products alongside the Rockettes at Radio City Music Center, and routinely picked up the phone in the middle of the night during crises.

Stepping down from the Golden Arches on the cusp of the Millennium, I felt like a little like a 16-year-old going on summer vacation, but with a bigger allowance. I also shifted my energies into several not-for-profit causes, one of which was the Geneva Lake Conservancy, a regional land trust that protects natural habitat in the Lake Geneva area. The Conservancy also speaks out on local environmental issues that affect land and water. One such major issue became the fight to preserve Yerkes Observatory, America’s first astrophysical laboratory and still home to the world’s largest and still operating refracting telescope, the kind you look straight through like an old fashioned telescope. The revered University of Chicago, which created the famed observation facility at the time of the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, decided to sell it off for development of a hotel/spa and home sites. The Yerkes property includes nearly 100 beautifully groomed acres running down to the lake, and has the last 550 feet of undeveloped shore land and woods along the lakeshore. It is both an environmental and historic treasure.

We at the Conservancy helped light a fire of community protest that mobilized lake residents and reached far beyond. As Conservancy chair, I found myself doing interviews with a score of newspapers and magazines, and appeared before the editorial boards of the Chicago Tribune and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. The bottom line is that after a long year of this well-coordinated effort, the University reversed its decision, canceled the sale contract and fired the university executive who had been in charge of engineering the deal.

Now, more than 10 years on, the University continues to operate the observatory with a staff, including astronomers, as a unique educational site, and has reinvested in the facility, and its historic lakeside grounds, once trod by Native Americans. The facility remains today in pristine condition. Many people were involved in the complex choreography of saving Yerkes, and I take small credit for coming up with one line that said it all: “The University of Chicago has been accidental conservationists of this site of rare beauty and historic importance for more than 100 years, and it ought to stay that way.”

Not so successful have been my recent attempts to stimulate some remorse and a change of heart at my old employer to save the restored site of Ray Kroc’s first McDonald’s restaurant in suburban DesPlaines, first opened in 1955. The building and its iconic road sign were slated for demolition, ostensibly because of flooding issues, but more likely because of a company hyper-focused on reinventing itself, even at the expense of some of its heritage. I found myself defending

this way station of post-war roadside history, even being interviewed in print and on WGN radio, where the host commented that President Trump is a big McDonald's fan, and wondered if he might help spur renewed historic preservation. I responded that McDonald's could do that themselves with the support of "their own orange-haired clown." The host then noted that I was quite clearly a "happily retired former spokesperson" for the brand.

As in all professions, it is an honor to be able to stand tall for people, products, organizations and issues that we value. Trying our best to tell the truth in the process, while not being just another Siri or Alexa chatbot, can be most challenging, and sometimes satisfying. To paraphrase what Mark Twain said of public relations: "It is about a good story, well told. That's why I am sometimes forced to tell them myself."

The arc of connectiveness is indeed integral to the human condition, and spokespeople play a key role in realizing that in today's world. At times we even deliver on opportunities to bring new clarity to vital issues and disperse that foggy "Spoke Smoke,"

Fifty years as a spokesperson have flown by, and that makes me think it's about time for a break, as we used to say at McDonald's. And for that I'll be most grateful.

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Chuck Ebeling earned a degree in journalism from Bradley University and also studied at the University of Chicago. He served in Vietnam and Chicago as an award-winning Army press officer, served on the corporate PR staffs as a strategist and spokesperson for Allstate Insurance, Toyota, Baxter International and McDonald's Corporation. He has served in not-for-profit board leadership roles in the hunger relief, health care, environmental, historical, and literary fields. Chuck also created the Ebeling PRize through which he supports and recognizes student community programs in cause-related communications at Bradley and Loyola of Chicago universities. In 2011, he was inducted into Bradley University's Centurian Society, recognizing graduates who have become national or international leaders in their field.

"Spoke Smoke" is Chuck's 14th essay presented to the Chicago Literary Club, of which he was President in 2016-17.