



## CEOs Get a Pass on Gossip

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Photo: Stephen J. Serio

Often in the columns, but sans the gossipy element: "That would be unacceptable," says Estelle Walgreen, attending a party to celebrate the Pritzker Children's Zoo at Lincoln Park Zoo last week.

New York's titans of business often collide with the city's rough-and-tumble gossip pages — but Chicago's top executives are virtual no-shows in "our town's" columns.

A review of two years of gossip and society columns in the Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Tribune shows barely a whisper of powerhouses including Kraft Foods Inc. and McDonald's Corp., unless the company itself is cited for sponsoring an event. Private company moguls stay off the radar, too.

"In New York, you see a great deal of business types — the Donald Trumps, Ron Perlman and Ron Burkle — constantly in gossip columns," says Sun-Times columnist Bill Zwecker, who covers local and national celebrity doings. "In Chicago, (business people) are friendly, but they make it clear they don't want to be in a column unless it puts them in a positive light.

"If it's something less than reputable or embarrassing or makes them look silly or trivial, it can be problematic for them at the next board meeting."

New York Post columnist Jared Paul Stern is accused of shaking down Mr. Burkle, a California supermarket billionaire and well-known Democratic Party contributor, for more than \$200,000 to keep false stories about him off the tabloid's "Page Six" gossip sheet.

In New York, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C, such columns are "harder-edged," says Bill Keegan, vice-president of Chicago-based Edelman Worldwide, a public relations firm that also has offices in New York. "But in Chicago, those columns go easier on their subjects."

Indeed, local columns tend to feature national celebrities and a stalwart group of Chicago society types, with media, entertainment and sports figures taking the spotlight over CEOs and real estate developers. When business owners do appear, it's likely to collect kudos for attending a fund-raiser, not to suffer tattling about failing marriages, wayward children or rumored affairs or illnesses.

"I've never been mentioned in gossip columns in the true sense or in a derogatory way. That would be unacceptable," says Estelle Walgreen, a fixture in the Chicago columns who's president and CEO of Converse Industries, a privately owned metal machining plant in Wisconsin. "It's never related to my business, which is what I prefer. I don't want business and private life to mingle."

Ms. Walgreen — who's related to the drugstore clan by a former marriage — says that if her name is mentioned, usually in the context of a fund-raising gala, it's through no effort on her part. Often a sponsor will tip off the writer, a common ploy by event organizers: "I'll be mentioned having attended an event, but I never ran into a reporter."

Neal Zucker, CEO of Corporate Cleaning Services, a Chicago-based window-washing company that specializes in high-rise buildings, also pops up frequently in Chicago's gossip pages. His 40th birthday bash, Mr. Zwecker wrote in February, was "one of the best parties this town has seen in quite awhile."

Usually, Mr. Zucker is cited for charity work. He, too, says he doesn't ask to have his name featured; it happens because he's become known around town.

"It becomes a self-perpetuating thing," acknowledges Mr. Zwecker. "In Chicago, our celebrity pool is not as big. Our most successful, important people in town are lovely people and movers and shakers in the community. But they're not sexy. They don't have glitz and glamour. So, you see a lot of media people, restaurateurs, socialites and sports figures mentioned, and then a scattering of business people."

There is the occasional exception. Last month, Ariel Capital Management LLC Chairman John Rogers and his former wife, Desiree, president of Peoples Energy, were mentioned in Mr. Zwecker's column after Grammy winner Kanye West showed up at their daughter's 16th birthday party. Mr. Rogers says he tried to keep the item out of the column, but only because he was concerned about having his daughter's name in the paper. "We don't worry about (society) columns in the boardrooms in Chicago, because you don't see a lot of gossiping or salacious material."



*Boeing Co. Chief Financial Officer James Bell and his wife, Mary, are often in the columns for attending fund-raising events. Photo: Stephen J. Serio*

In the 1980s and '90s though, Bill Farley was a gossip-worthy — and thrice-divorced — corporate leader. As chairman and president of then-Chicago-based Fruit of the Loom Inc., his love interests reportedly included a Miss America.

Some observers say the columns now carry less weight than ever. Mr. Keegan, of Edelman, says where his firm once might have pushed to get an executive named in the late Irv Kupcinet's legendary Sun-Times column to promote the company's identity, it now pitches celebrity spokespeople who are part of bigger ad campaigns. And executives have to consider the message it sends to have their names mentioned in a gossip column, says Mr. Keegan, who runs Edelman's crisis and issues practice, which works to minimize clients' exposure.

"To pursue placement or not (in a column) depends on the news value you have to offer and the possible repercussions," he says.

Margie Korshak, a Chicago publicist for 37 years and owner of public relations firm Margie Korshak Inc., agrees that column placement has become less important to clients.

"When I started, the biggest deal in the whole world was to have your name in 'Kup's Column,' " she says. "I wanted it so bad. And my clients wanted it. Then, as years went along, it didn't matter. A line in the column wasn't as strong as it once was."

### **HARD-HITTING PAST**

Columns have changed since the days of Walter Winchell, whose salacious syndicated column bashed plays, exposed sexual peccadilloes and reported the marriages and divorces of business executives. Similar — though less acerbic — columns were written by the late Herb Caen at the San Francisco Chronicle and Mr. Kupcinet.

By the early 1970s, journalism took on a more serious tone. But later, with Rupert Murdoch's "Page Six" — followed a decade later by People magazine — gossip "news" came back in vogue. Locally, while the Sun-Times retains a handful of both gossip and society columns, the Tribune has all but abandoned them, with the exception of freelance society gala coverage.

Stella Foster, the longtime assistant to Mr. Kupcinet who now has a Sun-Times column, says a mention may not pack the wallop it did back in Kup's day, but she still gets lobbied to drop certain names. "A lot of people love being in columns because it gives them a sense of respectability and

a sense that they're accomplishing something. They hear from friends when they've been given a particular honor. Many people are defined by their jobs, so it's important to them."

Other companies whose execs appear regularly on Chicago society pages agree, though they wouldn't talk about it directly.

"We're a Chicago company, and we think our executives should be visible and involved," says a spokesman for Aon Corp., an insurance brokerage whose top-level execs were mentioned a dozen times in local society columns during the past two years. "It's good for us and it's good for our clients."

### **CULTIVATING SOURCES**

During the past year, Aon Risk Services Director Robert Largay and his wife, Ellen, were noted to have attended a fund-raiser for the Inner-City Teaching Corps, a service organization. Aon CEO Patrick G. Ryan's wife Shirley was reported in the Tribune to have worn a red dress at a soirée, on theme, "like dozens of other women in the crowd."

Lester Coney, who was then with Aon, was mentioned for being named chairman of the board of the Goodman Theatre. Now an executive vice-president and senior managing director at Mesirow Financial, he is "one of our town's truly super-cool people," wrote Mr. Zwecker.

Philip M. Condit, who was Boeing Co.'s CEO when the aerospace giant moved its headquarters here in 2001, was a virtual nonentity on the Chicago social scene; current CEO W. James McNerney has never appeared in a gossip column. Even the scandalous exit of CEO Harry Stonecipher, who resigned last year after an affair with a subordinate, was largely ignored. But Boeing is now one of the most frequently mentioned companies, largely because of its social chief financial officer: The "brilliant James Bell" and "his lovely wife" Mary, as described by Ms. Foster, regularly attend charity events. Mr. Bell does not solicit the references, says a Boeing spokeswoman.



*Oft-mentioned Mesirow Financial exec Lester Coney is chairman of the board of the Goodman Theatre. Photo: Stephen J. Serio*

Such positive mentions — as well as noting birthdays, anniversaries and promotions — can pave the way for columnists' access when their subjects become part of bigger news. The Sun-Times' Michael Sneed, who focuses on local politics backed by doses of restaurant sightings and congratulatory items, scored an exclusive interview with former Gov. George Ryan the day of his recent conviction on corruption charges.

"Access is imperative with a column like mine," Ms. Sneed says. "I've been a reporter for 40 years. I know these people. You have to know them, and they have to trust you."

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