OFFICE HANDBOOK

INTERNAL MEMO:
From the CEO

It is with deep regret that I write to inform employees that several members of the executive team have been arraigned on racketeering charges for allegedly pumping the Company's stock in various Internet chat rooms. As this saga played out in a series of raids over the weekend, my inbox began to fill with employees' "frequently asked questions." I'll attempt to answer them here.

WILL I BE ARRESTED? No. Assuming you did nothing wrong and your manager has no arbitrary desire to make you a scapegoat, then I'd say you have an 80% chance of steering clear of law enforcement agents.

ARE YOU, AS CEO, RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS? No. Because the Company and its officers have done nothing wrong, no one can or should be held responsible.

SHOULD I WORRY ABOUT MY OWN STOCK-PUMPING ACTIVITIES? No. As Alfred E. Neuman once said, "What! Me worry?" But seriously, folks, on the advice of our legal department, I must ask employees to stop any activity that could be construed as stock pumping.

WILL THIS DAMAGE OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH CUSTOMERS? No. At least not with customers that are worth half a damn. Who cares about the others?

WILL I LOSE MY JOB? No. The Company has cash on hand to sustain us through month's end and to helicopter me to a remote part of Brazil if required. After the first of next month, your guess is as good as mine.

IS THIS THE END OF THE BAD NEWS? Yes. Investigations by several federal and state agencies into our business practices continue. But I believe that if we all keep a positive attitude and stay focused on the Company's core values, we'll soon end this trying period and face a brighter future. Also, I'm having lunch with Eliot Spitzer next week, so our competitors may have more to worry about than we do.

—Ryan Underwood

Send This Column to 1,000 Friends . . . *By Martin Kihn*

EARLIER THIS YEAR, the Net Debunking Unit (NDU) received alarming news by email: "In the coming weeks, CELLPHONE numbers are being released to telemarketing companies, and you will start to receive telesales calls." We were directed to call a toll-free number for a Do Not Call List and begged to "be a good buddy and pass this on." Now we are nothing if not good buddies, but something sounded phone-y.

So we checked with the Federal Trade Commission and found we were victims of an Internet hoax—one of more than 400 identified over the past few years. Like chain letters of the pre-Net era, email hoaxes start with some enticing hook ("Free money!"), move on to a terrifying assertion ("I may be wrong but . . ."), and end with a plea to "forward this to everyone you know."

Some are disguised sales pitches or attempts to get personal data. But most are either smear campaigns or pranks. "I think a lot of people who start these," says cyberhoax expert David Emery of About.com, "are lonely deviant types." According to the Department of Energy's Computer Incident Advisory Capability (www.ciac.org), most hoaxes fall into one of four categories:

- **Fake Warnings** These can be technical-sounding—the "Good Times" hoax warned of a (nonexistent) virus: if it "is not stopped, the computer's processor will be placed in an nth-complexity infinite binary loop." (There's no such thing.) Another variety aims at corporations, such as the call to boycott Starbucks for refusing to send coffee to soldiers in Iraq because execs "don't support the war." (Starbucks has no official position on the war.)
- **Sob Stories** Typical was the tale, circulated a few years ago, of a 9-year-old girl oddly named "Faith Hoemisteine," said to be "dieing of bone cancer" (hoaxers often don't spell very well) and whose only wish was "to get into the *Guinness World Book* [sic] for receiving the most greeting cards."
- **Too-Good-to-Be-True Offers** The best known of this species is a message, circulating since 1997, purporting to be from Bill Gates and thanking the recipient for "signing up for my Beta Email Tracking Application." If you forward his note to 1,000 people, "everyone on the list . . . will receive $1,000 and a copy of Windows98," a somewhat less compelling offer now than when the hoax began.
- **Urban Legends** This category can verge on the O. Henryish—as in the well-known "Neiman-Marcus Cookie" recipe story (a customer asks for the recipe and gets charged $250). Recently, emails have spread reports of monstrous "deep sea creatures" found on Phuket beaches after the tsunami.

Much like the "Do Not Call" message—they just don't ring true.

Martin Kihn is author of the new exposé *House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time* (Warner Business Books).

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process check (n.) a break called by an IT guy who needs to use the bathroom

Illustrations by Michael Kupperman