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PR Pros Advise BP's Dudley

Oil Giant Says No Change of CEO, but Observers Say Shift Could Do Much to Clean Up Image

By Michael Bush
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The news media is reporting that Robert Dudley, the BP executive overseeing the cleanup in the Gulf, will replace Tony Hayward as the oil giant's CEO. And many in the PR community think that would be a smart step for the beleaguered company right now.

Communications and crisis professionals said the move wouldn't serve as a silver bullet or cure-all but replacing the gaffe-prone Mr. Hayward gives the company a chance to draw a line in the sand and create a fresh start. Carleen Winters, exec VP at Interpublic Group of Cos.' MWW Group, said a new CEO creates the opportunity for BP to say "that was us then, and this is now" while making the conversation about responsibility and not fault.

"All of the conversation about BP went past responsibility to fault with every foot-in-the-mouth comment that Tony Hayward made," Ms. Winters said. "A new CEO gives them a chance to take a breath and while he's responsible for fixing the problems and moving the company forward, he gets the opportunity to not have the conversation be about fault as it relates to him and that can help BP move forward."

Marian Salzman, president, Euro RSCG Worldwide PR, North America, said a new CEO is only a partial reboot and that the company now needs to work on restoring confidence with results versus

pronouncement. "The challenge for BP is restoring its confidence so it can restore the public's confidence," Ms. Salzman said. She said the choice of Mr. Dudley, an American from the Gulf region, could provide a PR boost for BP. "Mr. Hayward is symbolic of what is wrong so he needs to be forgotten so that the global community can contemplate forgiving."

Ms. Winters said having a U.S. CEO that has a U.S. style and view on accountability to lawmakers in Washington, investors on Wall Street, employees and customers, surely couldn't hurt. But she said the devil will be in the details in terms of what kind of leader he turns out to be. "He has legitimate roots in the community, a legitimate concern for the region," Ms. Winters said. "He's of the community and not someone who was dropped into the community."

Asked if she thought hiring a U.S. CEO could be viewed as pandering by BP to U.S. consumers, Ms. Winters said no. "The U.S. public will not just roll over because he is a U.S. CEO," Ms. Winters said. "But the fact that he's not a Brit, who just by virtue of style can come off detached and arrogant, can they make that work in their favor? I think they can. But I don't think that's a guarantee."

A spokeswoman for BP cautioned against making assumptions about Mr. Dudley,

noting that nothing official has been announced. "As we speak Mr. Hayward is still running BP," she said.

With regards to BP's marketing, Ms. Winters said there will no doubt be all kinds of experts suggesting that it change everything including its logo, name and advertising messages. But she said that might not be the best idea if it can't execute. "BP needs to be able to deliver, and every marketing message is a promise and when you can't deliver on the promise people will lose even more faith; it almost doesn't matter what the promise is," Ms. Winters said. "I would tell them to be focused on getting it right operationally and culturally and the evolution of the external message will come naturally from there. That would be a very powerful message from the CEO — 'Here's where I'm focused, from the inside of the company out.' You can't say the right things unless you're doing the right things."

Ms. Winters said if she were advising Mr. Dudley she'd keep him away from media tours and talking any big plans he may have for BP. Instead she would advise he keep his head down and make sure it is doing everything it can with the situation in the Gulf.

"Then he should focus on the operations and process improvements and cultural changes that BP needs to implement in order to be worthy of trust," she said. "After that he can point to successes. This is not a situation where the right message can be a fix. The right actions over time can only change the course. But I always question whether the powers that be will have enough patience in a situation like this to give anybody enough time to make that happen."