

# Pinch-hitter

Susan Finco of Leonard & Finco, Green Bay, shares insight into crisis management **Margaret LeBrun**

**I**t was an altogether different type of spinach from the one that was recalled last September. Savoy, or curly leaf spinach, as Susan Finco describes it, isn't even grown in California, where flat-leaf spinach is grown.

But in the midst of the E. coli crisis traced to flat-leaf spinach, savoy spinach was also recalled, nonetheless. At Tosca Ltd., a Green Bay company that leases and sanitizes shipping containers for 95 percent of all the savoy spinach growers nationwide, business was at a standstill. Tosca was hurting, and so were its clients.

"We were down to nothing," recalls Tosca President John Frey. "For three weeks we didn't have any (work)

because the government banned all spinach sales — and we knew we weren't part of the reason. We needed somehow to let people know that the spinach our growers grow is good spinach."

In the midst of the spinach recall, Frey called the experts at Leonard & Finco Inc., Green Bay. Finco, owner and president, pressed her team into action. They helped Frey act as a point person for the savoy industry, which has no formal association. Frey coordinated a conference call with some 40 savoy growers from around the country, and Finco devised a plan that would get their business back on track immediately after the recall was lifted. They identified savoy growers, food scien-

*The team at Leonard & Finco springs into action. In the foreground, company co-founder Charlie Leonard, left, confers with account executive Cole Buerger. Photos by Jeff Lendrum, Image Studios*



tists and inspectors who agreed to be media contacts. A logo was created for savoy spinach packaging, and a plan devised to include a “grown in ...” label for each grower to indicate the state of origination.

Just as the ban was lifted, Leonard & Finco sent a flurry of press releases to media nationwide. CNN, the Washington Post, other newspapers and TV stations picked up the story, localizing it with the contacts provided throughout the country. Frey says the publicity was “amazing.” Finco credits him with taking initiative.

“My hat is off to Tasca, because that really was innovative thinking in how to go above and beyond for your customers,” says Finco. “Talk about the loyalty that this will buy for them.”

People who know her — and they are many, given that she’s long been involved in community projects, sits on the Packers Board of Directors and was a local news anchor in a previous life — say that’s just like Finco, to defer the accolades to others. Though a visible community leader, she revels in work behind the scenes, representing companies such as WPS, Georgia Pacific, Alta Resources, Citizens Bank and some 30 other clients at any given time.

The only agency north of Milwaukee that focuses solely on public relations, Leonard & Finco, founded in 1992 by Charlie Leonard (semi-retired) and Susan Finco, specializes in issues management, image campaigns, crisis management, media, community and government relations and special events. Its forte, says Finco, is crisis management. Whether it’s a spinach recall, a construction accident, an escaped wolf or mass layoff, Finco steps in as the pinch-hitter.

She sees every crisis as an opportunity for a company to rise above.

“If you don’t take action and you don’t respond or communicate, someone else will communicate for you — whether it’s your employees who may not have the whole story, or the media, or maybe your competitors,” Finco says.

Finco will address the topic, “Strategic Thinking in Times of Crisis” at the St. Norbert College CEO Breakfast & Strategy Series (see details at the end of this article).

The key to handling a crisis, says Finco, is the same as the Boy Scout motto: Be prepared, and it will be a whole lot easier to keep your cool, say



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PRESIDENT, LEONARD & FINCO

the right thing, minimize damage — and perhaps even save your business.

“The best thing any company can do to deal with a crisis is to have a good crisis communications plan in place,” Finco says. “The challenge is, and the reality is, how many people have the time or take the time to do it? Not many. So when something does happen, you have to react quickly. It’s often a very emotionally charged situation.”

A common scenario: a mass layoff. All too often, management handles all the legal aspects, human resources issues and logistics, but forgets that the public will want to know the fall-out.

“It’s so agonizing for them (CEOs) that they just can’t deal with it. It’s almost as if they’ve become paralyzed,” Finco says. “And they’re in denial. As a result, they may wait until a day or two before they actually have to go through with it to say, ‘Oh, I better contact our communications department or we better deal with this because we know there’s going to be a lot of questions.’ It’s not a criticism of leadership, it’s just human nature that if it’s something bad, those are often the hardest to deal with. If it is a fire or an explosion, most companies will spring into action. It’s those internal things that happen that are often more difficult, because of the emotion.”

John Jones, Green Bay Packers president and chief operating officer, says it was important that the Packers sought outside public relations help during the 2003 renovation of Lambeau Field. Leonard & Finco fit the bill.

“Because of Susan’s background and her contacts, because there were implications for the economy and for the community, we felt it would be a very good strategic move to have Susan involved as we went through the project,” Jones says. “It was invaluable to have Susan as an adjunct to the Packers PR department — the main difference being that while the Packers PR department does an excellent job on everything related to the football team, we wanted to make sure we had terrific representation to tell the story of the construction project so they could focus on all the things related to Packers football.”

In light of the widely publicized, tragic deaths of three construction workers at Miller Park in Milwaukee in 1999, Leonard & Finco was prepared for anything. Their disaster toolkit came in handy when one day during construction of the Lambeau Field atrium, a large piece of Spancrete fell and shattered. No one was hurt, no equipment was damaged. But a worker called the media, and that immediately set off alarms.

“The Milwaukee media started running crawls on TV within a half hour saying, ‘There’s been a construction accident at Lambeau field,’” Finco recalls. “The rumors intensified in less than an hour to the point where one of the calls we received was, ‘We heard the atrium collapsed!’”

Finco’s team pulled out their list of cell phone numbers of every key person on the project. Within an hour,

they arranged a press conference and interviews with construction managers and Packers management. What was a near public relations nightmare was calmly averted.

"This was an example where Susan was invaluable," recalls Jones. "She got to the media quickly and explained what happened. It really wound up being sort of a minor footnote in terms of the whole continuum of the project — which is where it belonged."

Finco has played the role of an aggressive reporter in mock crisis situations in the community, such as one staged by WPS Resources Corp., an exercise to ensure employees are up to speed in the event of a true disaster. WPS keeps detailed, written plans for handling disasters, from storms and power outages to bursting dams and pandemics, says Tom Meinz, WPS executive vice president, public affairs.

"Every once in a while we hire good consultants like Susan Finco to go over the plans to provide advice on the latest techniques," Meinz says. "We have a system in place where we can notify the world fairly quickly, and blast facts with every known media in Wisconsin."

Quick thinking also helped Leonard & Finco keep the public calm when a wolf escaped at the Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary, the agency's first client. The company provided regular updates of the saga, assuring the public that the sanctuary had secured its outermost fences and that the wolf would return to its enclosure when it was hungry, which it eventually did.

Another longtime client of Leonard & Finco is the Oneida Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. Charlie Leonard, who set up his PR business after leaving WBAY-TV as news director in 1979, developed a rapport with the Oneidas that has continued since he sold his part of the company to Finco seven years ago. Leonard now works part-time for Leonard & Finco, representing the Oneidas in the Guardian Pipeline, which involves the construction of a natural gas line proposed to run through the Oneida reservation.

Finco had met Leonard when she was working at WBAY-TV in the 1980s. She was co-anchor at WFRV-TV in Green Bay when her contract was about to expire in the fall of 1991, and ready for a change. Leonard encouraged her to set up her own business. Six months later, they joined forces.

"I told Susan, I want you to go home

## "STRATEGIC THINKING IN TIMES OF CRISIS"

Susan Finco, owner and president of Leonard & Finco  
St. Norbert College CEO Breakfast & Strategy Series  
Feb. 14 at 7:30 a.m.

F.K. Bemis Conference Center at St. Norbert College, De Pere  
Registration is \$60. For more information, go to [www.snc.edu](http://www.snc.edu) and click on "calendar of events/lectures at St. Norbert College;" or call (920) 403-3165.

and think about this until after the first of the year," Leonard recalls. "She called me New Year's Day!"

Today, Leonard & Finco employs a dozen people, including five part-time. Scott Stein, Cole Buerger, Kristin Paquet and Karen Buckoski, along with Leonard and Finco, make up the account executive team.

Besides the Packers board of directors, Finco serves on the boards of UW-Green Bay, Citizens Bank-Wisconsin, Bellin Health Systems and the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation. She has received numerous awards, including the 2002 Small Business Person of the Year Award, and the 1995 Green

Bay Athena Award from the Green Bay Chamber. A Milwaukee native, she was also the first recipient of the UW-Milwaukee Fox Valley Alumni of the Year Award in 1995.

Leonard says Finco's connections have clearly helped fuel the company's success; it has seen steady increases in revenue every year for the past several years.

"PR is probably 60 percent of who you know and 40 percent of what you know," he says, adding that the extensive work the agency has done in political campaigns and referendums has injected a higher level of sophistication for their clients.

Finco believes her best asset is her team.

"Crisis management isn't about one person handling the crisis," she says. "You really need a team."

Who could possibly imagine all the potential crises that might face a company?

"We can!" Finco says with a laugh. "We do joke that there are some companies, when we walk in the door, they say, 'Oh no, look whose coming!'"

"But if you have a plan in place, it can get you through a crisis. Something very small can get so out of control that it can become an obstacle you can't overcome. How you handle a crisis can ultimately impact the future success of your business." **MP**



Leonard & Finco full-time account executives gather in their Green Bay office. Clockwise, from left: Karen Buckoski, Cole Buerger, Susan Finco and Kristin Paquet (missing: account executive Scott Stein).