

IT'S HER JOB, IT'S WHAT SHE DOES FOR A LIVING

An Interlude of Torment in Peggy Siegal's PR Hell

PEGGY SIEGAL

Fifty-three minutes after my 4:00 p.m. appointment had been scheduled to begin, I still hadn't had a chance to speak with the world's most powerful and unpleasant press agent. Instead, I sat uncomfortably close to her as she conducted her nefarious business over the phone.

"I'm not going to pimp for Jay McInerney," Peggy Siegal cackled into the receiver. "Let him find his own date!" At the moment, Peggy's partner in bad-mouthing was movie producer Jerry Bruckheimer. "So listen," Peggy continued, "when I asked Jay to dinner with you, he asked, 'Who else is going to be there?' Can you beat that? *Who else is going to be there?* Listen, call me tonight, I can't talk here. I know. I know. I know. Listen, this is my job, this is what I do for a living!"

Peggy banged home the phone and regarded me suspiciously across a desk top bristling with family-size Rolodexes. The name of the former television editor at *US* magazine stared at me upside down.

"Peggy, Chuck Grodin's on the phone," announced one of Peggy's three young female assistants, all of whom work in the stuffy un-climate-controlled half-room that is the Peggy Siegal Company. The assistant wore the beleaguered look of a slave rower in *Spartacus*.

"Be with you in a second," Peggy Siegal barked at me, with no trace of irony. She picked up the phone, and her voice rang with mock chumminess: "Chuck! Hi! Are you in Connecticut?" She then nodded vigorously as she listened to some complaint of Grodin's. "Chuck, Chuck, *Chuck*," she tittle-tattled into the phone. "This is my job, this is what I do for a living!"

Ostensibly, Peggy Siegal had summoned me to her Brill Building command post because I had been assigned to interview Patty Hearst for a respectable women's magazine. Paul Schrader's film about Patty's kidnapping was just coming out, Patty was talking it up to the press and Peggy Siegal was scheduling all the interviews. "I don't think it's going to happen," Peggy had told me over the phone the previous week. "I told your editor that they should get Gloria Steinem to write it. I don't even know who you are!"

I had explained to her that Gloria Steinem didn't write for this magazine and earnestly pleaded my case for access. Peggy had sighed and put on a voice that said *I'm doing you a big favor, bub*. She had instructed me to send some articles I'd written and a résumé, and to come to her office to be personally checked out.

So here I was.

When I had first arrived at the Peggy Siegal Company, one of the put-upon adjutants had immediately sat me down in front of Peggy Siegal herself. She had greeted me by reaching past my head and grabbing a sheaf of Xeroxed newspaper clips from another assistant. She had scanned the first page. "You call *this* a good review?" she had yelled over my shoulder at the assistant. "You think I can show *this* to a client?" Her aide had shrugged. The phone had rung. Peggy Siegal had taken the call.

And there I had sat in the cramped, stuffy little office for—I checked my watch again—56 minutes.

"Chuck, Chuck, Chuck, *Chuck*. Listen to me, Chuck," Peggy said to Charles Grodin, rolling back her chair as well as her eyes. The Peggy Siegal Company was handling the publicity for Grodin's film *Midnight Run*, and apparently the actor was being testy about his interview schedule. "Look," Peggy said, "the limo will take you in from Connecticut, you'll go to the studio for the interview, then the limo will take you back."

Apparently, Grodin was also interested in the coverage his costar, Robert De Niro, was getting. "Chuck, Chuck, the picture in *People* is of *both* of you," Peggy reassured him. "I don't know, Bobby's talking a few places. *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*. I know he never talks, but he's talking now. Who? He'd talk to the phone book!" Peggy listened for a little bit, then nodded. "Look, Chuck, the Sunday *Daily News Magazine* is interested. You don't read the Sunday *Daily News*? They've got a circulation of millions, real unwashed masses, you know?"



Peggy banged down her receiver a moment later, and she glared in my direction. "Okay, let's make this quick," she said, 61 minutes after our appointment had been scheduled to begin. Peggy grabbed my résumé and ran her thumb down the page. She stopped when she came to the name of a magazine where I had worked a few years ago: "Patty hates *Newsweek*, she *hates* them!" As she scanned the rest of my résumé, she continued to disparage everything I had ever done, up to and including my graduation from St. Louis Park Senior High School.

That task finished, Peggy began her summation. "Listen," she said, "Patty read all your stuff and hates it." *That's odd*, I thought. I'd just read in *USA Today* that Patty had been in France all week, plugging her film over there. The clips I had sent couldn't have gotten to Peggy's office before today.

"Anyway," Peggy continued, "Patty only likes to be interviewed by people she knows. Like X." She gave me the name of a journalist. "They're *very* close, *very* good personal friends. She'll talk to him." *That's odd*, I thought. I *knew* X. Sure he did a Patty Hearst story once upon a time, but I knew for a fact that they weren't very close, very good personal friends.

"So what can I say?" Peggy said. "We'll be in touch."

Above me, a ceiling fan turned slowly and futilely. Behind me, Peggy's assistants continued to labor earnestly in the fetid air. Inches from my face, Peggy was back on the phone. This seemed to mean that I was free to go.

I leapt from my chair and strode toward the office door, feeling like Ebenezer Scrooge after he awoke reborn from his tormented dreams. But as I got to the door, I faltered.

"This is my job," I heard Peggy Siegal intone into the phone another time, to someone new. "This is what I do for a living!"

—Neal Karlen