

SCHWALTZ, JUDY

(Enter VIRGIL SCHWALTZ, elderly owner of the downtown furniture store. He is nondescript, except for a ridiculous toupee. He storms to the front desk.)

SCHWALTZ

(Shouting.) I need to see Hoffman! Where is he? You nincompoops have really done it this time!

JUDY

(Rises, meets SCHWALTZ at front desk.) Done what? And honestly, who even says “nincompoops” anymore?

SCHWALTZ

Don't play games! Have you seen it? Have you seen my ad?

JUDY

Of course I saw it. I hope every one of our readers did, too. What's the problem?

SCHWALTZ

It's supposed to read, “Sale on grandfather clocks. Clllllocks. You idiots left out the letter “l.”

IMOGENE

Oh good heavens.

JUDY

Give me that. (Takes paper, leafs to the page featuring the ad) You have got to be kidding me.

(Reads.) Oh my God.

SCHWALTZ

You see? And look what it says right underneath!

JUDY

“Prices cut to the bone.”

(IMOGENE stifles a laugh.)

SCHWALTZ

I'm a laughingstock. Can you imagine the grief I'm going to get at coffee this morning? Not to mention the prank calls from teenagers asking how much we're charging for grandfather ... well, you know. You've turned me into a walking Viagra commercial.

JUDY

Virgil, I am so –

SCHWALTZ

It's Mr. Schwartz, thank you very much. Now where the hell is Hoffman? I want that moron saleswoman of yours fired for this. If you don't make this right, I'll sue!

IMOGENE

Mr. Hoffman should be in shortly. Would you like to wait, or should I have him call you?

SCHWALTZ

Tell him he'll be hearing from me. And my lawyer! (Storms out.)

JUDY

Well, this has been a hell of a morning already.

JESSICA, VIRGIL SCHWALTZ & CHARLES

(Enter SCHWALTZ, dressed in a Dracula costume.)

SCHWALTZ

(In his best Transylvanian accent.) Good eeeeevening.

JESSICA

Oh, hello, Mr. Schwartz. What are you doing here?

SCHWALTZ

Just thought I'd stop by on my way to your little soiree.

CHARLES

You're coming? But I thought you hated us.

STEVE Yeah, since we called you a furniture pimp.

SCHWALTZ

I am using tonight's big event to announce to everyone in town my intention to sue this piddly rag for everything it's worth. Which isn't much. One might say I'm here to crash the party. Just thought I'd come by to rub it in.

JESSICA

Mr. Schwartz, if there's anything I can do to smooth this over -

STEVE

Hey, Virgil, Liberace called. He wants his outfit back.

SCHWALTZ

I'm Dracula, you idiot.

STEVE

Well, you certainly suck.

SCHWALTZ

Taking you guys to the cleaners will be a pleasure.

STEVE

If anything's going to the cleaners, it should be that ratty toupee of yours.

SCHWALTZ

I do not wear a hairpiece.

JUDY

And Madonna is a nun.

(IMOGENE launches into a sneezing fit, trying to steady herself on the front counter and stumbling toward SCHWALTZ.)

SCHWALTZ

I will add this little exchange to my claim against your newspaper. Intentional infliction of emotional distress!

(IMOGENE unleashes an epic sneeze that knocks SCHWALTZ's toupee off his head.

SCHWALTZ searches frantically for it. STEVE darts from the newsroom and past the counter, retrieving the toupee.)

STEVE

How do you explain this, then, Virgil, you old liar? (Holding it aloft.) This thing looks like the pet hamster I had in sixth grade.

SCHWALTZ

Please return it to me.

STEVE

(Hiding it behind his back.) Return what?

SCHWALTZ

You know what.

STEVE

You said you don't wear a hairpiece, so this can't possibly be yours.

SCHWALTZ

Just give it back

STEVE

Come and get it.

JESSICA, JUDY, CHARLES

JESSICA

OK, so I've only been in this business for like, four months. When - and why - did everything start breaking bad?

JUDY

Here's the deal, Jess: Back in the '90s, when the Internet was new and Steve still had his original liver ...

STEVE

Appreciate that.

JUDY

... nobody knew how to handle the Web. It was exploding, and everyone saw the importance of gaining a foothold. So we all launched Web sites, assuming we'd figure out a business model later.

CHARLES

Uhhhhh the problem is, we still haven't found a way to make money on them.

JUDY

Most papers haven't found success charging for online subscriptions because so many sites offer news for free.

JESSICA

I hear you, girl. The other problem is online advertising is a tough sell. A lot of business owners still don't use computers, so they won't buy Internet ads.

JUDY

A lot of them couldn't tell a laptop from a lap dance.

JESSICA

Right? And many say they like the printed product because it sits around the house for a few days, rather than disappearing from a screen after a few seconds.

CHARLES

So we began by giving away our content without recompense, and now, having foresworn that loot, we're out of luck.

JUDY

Right. Everyone expects everything online to be free ... we can't put the toothpaste back into the tube.

JESSICA

(Catching on) And if people can't get the news they want for free from us, they'll find it elsewhere.

STEVE

Unless they need results from the fourth-grade tiddlywinks finals at St. John's.

CHARLES

It is a fascinating case study in macroeconomics.

JUDY

I might find it more fascinating if my job weren't on the line. I doubt there's a lot of demand out there for middle-aged former newspaper editors.

JESSICA

Sounds like everyone's job here is on the line. Total buzzkill.

(A brief silence)

CHARLES

So, when is this ball again?

JUDY

Two weeks from Saturday night, at the country club.

JESSICA

(Rising). OK, so I totally know you guys won't like this idea, but what if we all go with a group theme for our costumes? You know, like if we went retro and all went as members of the Village People?

HOFFMAN, STEVE & JUDY

(Enter HOFFMAN, the publisher, a man in his 50s clad in a business suit. He walks past the front desk, into the newsroom. He is stern and weary.)

HOFFMAN

All.

IMOGENE

Good morning, sir.

HOFFMAN

Did Malinski call yet?

IMOGENE

No, sir.

HOFFMAN

Any fires to put out so far? Everything kosher with today's edition?

STEVE

Ha! Today's paper is about as kosher as pork rinds.

JUDY

(Approaching) Good morning. Lester was in complaining about today's lead story.

HOFFMAN

Predictable.

STEVE

Like night following day, or Charles volunteering to cover any event that features a buffet.

JUDY

He has filed a libel suit. (Hands HOFFMAN the papers.)

HOFFMAN

Terrific. So he's serious?

JUDY

Seems to be.

HOFFMAN

What does he want?

JUDY

A front-page retraction. After we do some digging and discover he's being framed, that it's all a government setup.

HOFFMAN

Any chance he's right?

JUDY

He isn't notorious as the town crackpot for nothing. But just in case, I'll have Charles follow up.

HOFFMAN

Sounds good. One thing, Judy: I want to have an advance look at anything we publish on this story. Malinski has taken an interest in it.

JUDY

Corporate is taking notice of the news product? Stop the presses!

HOFFMAN

Those are our marching orders. Anything else I need to know this morning?

JUDY

Virgil Schwartz was in about his ad.

HOFFMAN

Problem?

STEVE

Not if you like appearing on The Tonight Show's "Headlines."

IMOGENE

Seems we left out a letter. A rather important one.

HOFFMAN

(Grabbing the nearest copy.) Oh, you have got to be kidding me. Where is Jessica?

IMOGENE

In and out already. She went over to calm Virgil down.

HOFFMAN

He's pretty upset?

JUDY

Threatened a lawsuit.

HOFFMAN

Terrific.

STEVE

I don't know what he's so pissed about. I mean, the man sells old wood. So what's wrong with promoting grandfather –

HOFFMAN

Steve! Imogene, send Jessica in when she gets back. Until then, I need to prep for Malinski's call. (Exits to his office at the rear)

HOFFMAN, STEVE & JUDY

HOFFMAN

OK, everyone: Congratulations to all of you on the fundraiser. It was a smashing success, and I thank each and every one of you for your efforts. It looks like we'll get through this quarter OK, but the shareholders remain nervous about next quarter. Which is why I've been ordered to institute some more belt-tightening measures.

STEVE

Tighten our belts any more, and Charles' digestive system will kick into reverse. He'll start erupting veggie sausages from his mouth.

HOFFMAN

We're going to add a round of furloughs next quarter, and the 401(k) match will remain suspended. We're also going to cut the paper back to three days a week (IMOGENE gasps) while continuing to publish daily news online. This will save us newsprint and delivery costs. Hopefully things will turn around and we can survive the next quarter without layoffs.

JUDY

(Rising) What?!? We're not a daily anymore?

STEVE

You have got to be kidding me.

HOFFMAN

Newsprint is our No. 2 expense, behind personnel. We believe relying upon the website will allow us to cut back on expenses and ride out the storm.

JUDY

"We?"

HOFFMAN

Malinski, the board of directors ... and me.

CHARLES

What about revenue? Do you expect subscribers to pay the same amount to get half as manypapers?

HOFFMAN

Subscribers will get full access to the website, as well as the three print editions each week, at the same price they're paying today.

STEVE

Come on, man, a lot of subscribers don't even use computers. Look at our demographics. Have you seen the market research? Our audience doesn't just skew old ... it skews dead.

HOFFMAN

Easy, Steve.

JUDY

If I may, I'd like to propose an alternative. Rather than cutting back on the printed product and pushing readers to the website, why don't we do the opposite?

HOFFMAN

Huh?

STEVE

Yeah, huh?

JUDY

I think everyone in this business is getting it wrong. The websites would be great if they were making money, but they aren't. By giving away the product free, we're essentially competing with ourselves. We're encouraging people not to buy the paper.

HOFFMAN

Judy ...

JUDY

Let me finish. It makes no sense to me to give away our best stuff online. Plus, we add photo galleries and other special features the print subscribers don't get ...why give more to the freeloaders than to the paying customers?

CHARLES

As my Mumsy always said, "Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?" Or course, she was vegan.

HOFFMAN

Judy, what are you driving at?

JUDY

Honestly, sir, if I were in your shoes, the first thing I'd do is shut down the website.

HOFFMAN

(Incredulous.) Shut down the website?

JUDY

Absolutely. Give readers only one avenue for their local news, and make them pay us for it.

LESTER & CHARLES

LESTER All right, Becksley, where's my correction?

CHARLES

(Approaches front desk.) I'm working on a follow-up piece.

LESTER

I don't remember it taking this long to prepare your original story on this topic, when the DNR was throwing around blatant lies.

STEVE

We had to get the word out before half the county became afflicted with cryptosporidium. You know what that is, Lester? It's a waterborne pathogen, a parasite. Sort of like the people who read the paper online instead of buying a subscription.

LESTER

I know about crypto. And I know I didn't dump cow crap in my creek! The sheriff and the DNR framed me!

CHARLES

Why would they do that?

STEVE

Yeah, Lester, you're more full of shit than your creek.

LESTER

You'll feel otherwise if you test this sample I took from my creek. And perhaps while you're waiting for the results to come back, you could do some digging and get to the bottom of things.

STEVE

Look, Lester, I get it. I think you're right about the sheriff having it in for you. After all, you hosted that dope festival on your farm and created a huge pain in his butt. He probably blew the whistle and called the DNR on you.

CHARLES

We had to report the DNR's findings. And if we learn there's something rotten in the state of Denmark, we'll report that, too. It just takes time.

LESTER

Don't take too long. Our court date isn't far off. (Exits.)

LESTER, STEVE & JUDY

LESTER

Well, well, well. I see all the local yellow journalists are assembled. Wait, no...one is missing from the muckrakers' convention. A disgusting old coot with an appetite for junk food and sensationalizing stories.

STEVE

You're going to have to narrow it down. That could be any one of us.

LESTER

(Angered.) Charles Becksley! You know I want a piece of his hide. I've been waiting too long for my correction!

STEVE

They make pills for that now, Lester. But you should consult a doctor if it lasts longer than four hours.

IMOGENE Oh good heavens. (Exits to conference room.)

LESTER

I said correction!

STEVE

I bet Virgil Schwartz has a stash of those pills. He was just here. Did you hear about him and his grandfather c-

LESTER

I want a correction, or a retraction, or whatever you want to call it. I want this newspaper to bend over and kiss my rear end.

JUDY

Charles is working on a follow-up story, Lester, but we aren't going to run a correction if nothing we've reported was inaccurate. I get that you're angry about the DNR raid, but don't shoot the messenger.

(CHARLES enters, munching on an Almond Joy bar.)

LESTER

There you are. You'd better get to the bottom of things and put a fair story, a true story, in print, and I mean pronto. I want your lies corrected, and if they aren't, I'll have your useless hides kicked to the curb. In the meantime, anybody - you, the sheriff, the DNR - setting foot on my property will be ducking bullets. What do you have to say about that?

CHARLES

(Offering, speaking with mouth full) Almond Joy?



