Carville, Matalin: Informed voters will drive next election

By Robin Lee Allen

Although husband and wife political strategists James Carville and Mary Matalin rarely see eye to eye on government-related issues, they agreed during their keynote address at the 2003 Multi-Unit Foodservice Operators conference in Atlanta that America is at an interesting presidential election year next year.

Matalin, a Republican who is active in the Bush administration, and Carville, a Democrat regularly appearing on talk shows lambasting his wife's conservative peers, both acknowledged that Sept. 11, 2001, increased the intensity with which citizens scrutinize those seeking elected office and reduced voter tolerance for anything but pressing issues.

People know we have major problems, and they want "reality-based solutions," Matalin said. She predicted that voters are better informed now than in the past and will turn out in force to vote in 2004. "The B.S. meter for politicians is way low," she added.

Carville conceded that voter turnout would be high in 2004. Noting that the Democratic party often acts like a collection of interest groups rather than a national party, he said the candidates must remain focused on such front-burner issues as the military, the economy and trade. "If we allow the debate to slip into ancillary crap, then we're going to be hardly judged in 2004," he said.

The Democratic candidates must communicate their visions of the world, he added. "People want these guys to have a vision," he said.

Matalin stated that Vice President Dick Cheney would be on the Republican ticket next year, and that her personal favorite among the Democratic contenders would be New York-based activist Al Sharpton.

Carville, who acknowledged that Hilary Clinton would like to be president, and "so would 95 other senators," also said of the field of Democratic hopefuls, "If I were in the White House, I'd want a long, drawn-out process rather than one frontunner.

Matalin contended that the administration's efforts in Iraq were being misconstrued by its people and that people were "losing the forest through the trees" in the debate over the war.

People have to remember that this is a war against Islamic fundamentalism, she indicated, and that "relative to the cost of another [terrorist] attack, this cost is small."

She added, "When this sort of challenge is not met, the terrorists get stronger, better-armed.

Addressing a question from the audience about the administration's current troubles in winning support from the United Nations on President Bush's Iraq policy, she said, "As long as the president has the support of the UN, I know that's not the perception, but it's the reality."

She added that the United States could not accommodate France's request of turning over to the Iraq people their government in its embryonic stage, but that "we will win - patience.

When asked her opinion of the obesity-related lawsuits now confronting the foodservice industry, Matalin said, "I have one word: personal responsibility." She added, "It's simple to a bigger problem: our lifestyle."

Carville also enjoyed mocking Matalin about her "ordo-" answer, noting that as an unmarried attorney, he was not certain about the legal merits of such lawsuits. "It seems it's more of an image problem than a legal one," he said.

When asked to weigh in on California's gubernatorial recall, Carville said, "I have a problem with political populism. You should have an election and live with the consequences."

"I'll be damn glad when it's over," he added.

Carville and Matalin are the co-authors of "All's Fair: Love, War and Running for President" and will appear on a new talk show set to air Sunday evenings on CNN. In closing, Carville reminded the audience, "You can always disagree, but you don't have to be disagreeable."

Corporate ethics: Best behavior should start at the top

While most people agree that corporations should behave in an ethical manner, the challenge for the restaurant industry, like all others, is to put into practice what one preaches, according to participants on the corporate-ethics panel at the Multi-Unit Foodservice Operators conference in Atlanta.

During the hour-and-a-half long seminar, panelists engaged in a lively discussion about setting standards and enacting procedures to foster ethical conduct and address such issues as insider trading activities, employee honesty and sexual harassment.

"Corporate ethics starts at the top," said Margaret Waldrep, chief administrative officer of Madison, Ga.-based Avado Brands, Inc. "You have to model the behavior. People do as their leaders do."

Waldrep pointed out that while the high-profile corporate scandals in the news have been linked to finance and accounting matters, employee and customer issues also have the potential to damage a company. Henry Hickey Jr., chairman and chief executive of Atlanta-based Rare Hospitality International, noted that the laws and regulations passed since the Enron debacle and others of its ilk have been a response to the actions of a greedy few.

"You can't regulate ethics," Hickey said. "Governance and regulations are pretensions of what to do. Unfortunately, they can't possibly cover the list of what not to do."

Agreeing with Waldrep, he added, "I believe we are to the extent to which an ethical culture - doing the right thing - permeates a company is usually best set by the behaviors and the words of the people at the top."

Michael Kaufman, former president of Plano, Texas-based Metromedia Restaurant Group, said his company valued bringing bad news to the table first to avoid being surprised or blindsided.

"We worked hard to make it safe to disagree and report on problems and opportunities so that they could be honestly and straightforwardly addressed," he said.

Skip Sack, a director on the board of Overland Park, Kan.-based Applebee's International, gave several concrete examples of his approach to setting an ethical tone.

"One of the things I've always done when I've gone into my restaurants and taken something home - I've paid for it," he said, using the example of taking a box of plastic wrap from the kitchen. "[The manager] would always say, "Oh, forget it; forget it" But I wouldn't forget it, because I want to set the tone," he continued.

"Set the tone yourself, and people see what you do and they will follow suit," he concluded.

Sack also described the procedures that Applebee's has in place for preventing insider trading. He said officers and directors are not permitted to trade shares in the company until 48 hours after information is released, which, he noted, is a lot longer than the 18-hour wait typical of many other companies.

In addition, all officers and directors - and their brokers - must notify the company's general counsel before and after trading Applebee's shares, supplying precise details of the transaction.

Sack said Applebee's also evaluates its chief executive on an annual basis through extensive, confidential interviews. An outside consultant interviews each employee directly to the chief executive, selected department heads, every board member and some franchisees.

The company also has every director evaluate every other director on the board every year, he said.

Several panelists spoke about what a company should do if an employee is accused of wrongdoing.

Avado's Waldrep said one has to get as much information as possible from both sides before making a decision.

"Then at the end of the day, it truly is a judgment call," she said. "You've got to be consistent and fair. You can't make exceptions based on someone's productivity or financial success... if they truly have done something that is not in the best interest of all the stakeholders."

C. Phillips Wells, ofanduman for Charlotte, NC-based Compass Group USA, agreed. "I think... (that) when we begin to apply [standards] inconsistently is when we come across problems," he said.

Two panelists discussed firing employees for lying, even though they were very productive.

Fairness and consistency are key factors in defending oneself in an employee termination lawsuit, Waldrep asserted.

"You can never, ever be held hostage by the threat of lawsuits when we've done everything that you can possibly do to be fair and honest in dealing with a situation," she said Waldrep added that as a result of its policies, Avado has had very little of that kind of litigation. She also noted that the company would not settle a lawsuit unless it lead done something wrong.