

Kilborn joke about killing Bush spells trouble at CBS

By Craig McGuire

NEW YORK: PR pros at CBS had more than abandoned castaways on their minds late last month following an ill-conceived gag on *The Late Late Show With Craig Kilborn*.

The furor started on August 4, when the show ran a picture of GOP presidential hopeful George W. Bush and flashed the caption "snipers wanted" over it. Shortly thereafter, the unamused Secret Service contacted CBS to investigate the bit, prompting the network's PR machine to jump into action.

Gil Schwartz, EVP of communications at CBS, noted that the clip was aired for less than five seconds. Nonetheless, he said a PR strategy, including the drafting of an apology, was quickly formulated.

"There was a moderate viewer response but not overwhelming," he explained. "We thought maybe it would quietly go away."

But in the days that followed, it became clear that the incident had staying power. After CBS sent its formal apology to the Associated Press, most major media outlets picked up the wire story. Kilborn later apologized personally on the air, and the Bush campaign accepted the apology.

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



Craig Kilborn... CBS under FCC fire after show ran bit about "snipers wanted" for George W.

However, the story was not about to die quite so easily. FCC Commissioner Gloria Tristani blasted the network in a strongly worded letter, which became the focus of a *Variety* article headlined, "FCC Says CBS' Kilborn Apology Not Enough."

FCC legal counsel William

Friedman said the substantial number of complaints the organization received prompted Tristani to pen the letter, but he could not quantify the response rate. He said, however, that it included hundreds of e-mails. "The commissioner has spoken out on these issues in other contexts, so it makes

sense that she would pay attention to this as well," Friedman explained.

Added Schwartz, "Look, there are times when large public organizations screw up, and this was one of them. We focused clearly and quickly on the mistake and did everything we could to right the wrong."