From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

JACK M. MARTINS   September 4, 2014

Question Everything

"Don't believe everything you read on the internet." – Abraham Lincoln

I always chuckle whenever I see that quote posted on someone's Facebook page with a picture of our 16th president. Of course, Honest Abe said no such thing, but the gag effectively calls to mind one of the prevailing crises of the nonstop communication age we live in. There's misinformation everywhere and unfortunately, we spend more and more of our time deciphering what can and can't be believed. To be sure, that's been true since the invention of the printing press and while American history is littered with its share of snake oil salesmen and Ponzi schemes, it definitely seems to be getting worse. Regrettably, with the rise of the internet, a ten-year old can publish something online that proliferates virally to such an extent that millions will share it without once checking if it's true.

It happens more and more often and it's a major concern to news agencies everywhere. In fact, journalists from around the world regularly meet to discuss how best to combat the problem as they find their researched and accurate reports vying with rumor and propaganda for people's attention. What's worse, the intensity and frequency of this phenomenon has created a Wild West atmosphere of sorts, where certain individuals and organizations not only intentionally engage in spreading misinformation, they profit by their deceitfulness.

Beyond advertisements just think of how often throughout the day we are bombarded with such messaging: get rich quick schemes on the internet, tabloid divorces on the supermarket shelves, fad diets on television talk shows and ominous e-mail chain letters that promise your demise unless forwarded. Behind every one of them a buck is being made. Sadly, this happens even in the halls of government. There's certainly no doubt that special interest groups spend millions rigging statistics, muddying waters and spreading half-truths. If we could pull back the curtain far enough to find their origin, we'd find someone, somewhere calculating a payday.

So what are everyday people to do? I think our best bet is to inoculate ourselves from the fraudulent onslaught by adopting some old-school critical examination skills. Long before there was an internet, dare I say when television was still black and white, my dad offered me advice that I now pass on to my four daughters. I think it might be helpful to any one of us.

First, we should naturally question things. Yes, dear old dad still does this almost instinctively. And probably most of us of a certain age agree that our fathers were the first to call "baloney" when they heard it. But there's some good common sense to be had there: if it sounds wrong or far-fetched, it probably is. Second, we should gauge our familiarity. Just ask this simple question: do we know and trust the source or is it coming from an unknown entity? Last but certainly not least, we might all benefit from a little bit of skepticism. Could there be an ulterior motive? Is there any way the messenger could profit from our believing him or her? If you are not satisfied with these answers, then it's a pretty good bet the message you're getting might just be hogwash.

This week saw the first day of school for many of our children. The lazy long days of summer are winding down and we once again jump back into busily juggling schedules. I wish you and your families a happy start to the school year and I hope we can all cut

through the "baloney" and stay focused on what matters.