



April 26, 2010

## Blackwater considered the 'poster child of the industry'?

Industry leaders respond to dismal public perception issues with solutions

By Leischen Stelter

RALEIGH, N.C.—On April 16, five Blackwater executives were charged in North Carolina with illegally acquiring automatic weapons and filing false documents in a scheme to obtain government contracts. In a [Los Angeles Times article](#), Peter Singer, author of a 2003 book about the private security industry and a fellow at the Brookings Institution, was quoted as saying the firm has "sort of become the poster child for the industry."

Blackwater, which has since been renamed Xe Services, represents a very specific sector of the security industry, focused largely on tactical, private-army roles rather than traditional guarding services, but does its controversial dealings continue to hurt the public's perception of security?

Sandra Davies, the executive director of the International Foundation for Protection Officers and a past chair of ASIS Private Security Services Council, said she and colleagues she'd spoken with about this subject were "actually offended by this statement because in no way, shape or form is Blackwater a poster child of the industry." Blanket statements such as these continue to mislead the public about the role and competence of security, she said.

"What a lot of professionals are doing is trying to change the perception of security officers and unfortunately the profession has been laden with poor characteristics: nightwatchman and security guards sleeping at their post," she said.

But this effort to improve the public image of the industry has not been driven by security companies alone; much of the push for improved security has come from the public, she said. "Since 9/11 there has been a demand for competent, educated security officers," she said. "They are often our first responders and the people who are on site at the time of an event." This, coupled with the fact that there are more career opportunities for those entering the field, has contributed to a higher level of competence.

Lynn Mattice, chairman of the board of advisors for the Security Executive Council, which is a membership organization for leading senior security executives, said that educating the public is only part of the challenge. He said he was shocked to discover that courses focused on security concerns were often left out of most MBA and CEO-track educational programs, something that the SEC has been working to change. "We're trying to make a difference by injecting philosophy, methodology and concepts about security into the standard MBA program," he said. "To us, what's needed is to create a more thorough understanding across management about the role and importance and effectiveness of security and move it away from the gates, guns and guards concept."

Likewise, it's also critical for CSOs and other high-ranking security officers to hone their business skills and understand the needs of the business environment they're operating in. "You have to focus on how to align yourself and help the company meet all their goals and objectives within a risk tolerance established for the company," he said.

**Chris Carey, president of Chris Carey Advisors, a consulting company based in Brooklyn, N.Y., said that he believes the public accurately distinguishes between private army security companies like Blackwater and traditional guard companies, but thinks the whole industry "has been commoditized over time and most security companies are caught in a death spiral of marginal services, lower fees and lower pay per hour and disgruntled employees."**

**Carey said he has been working with a guard company out of New Jersey on improving their service offerings and customer satisfaction. The company solicited guards' opinion and made efforts to engage them. "It was amazing how the guards banded together and for the first time had a sense of job ownership and a sense of pride in the service they were providing and of course the level of service jumped," he said. As a consequence, the number of attempted thefts at that customers' location dropped off drastically as well.**

For these street-level security officers to become true poster children for the industry, the public is going to have to have consistently excellent experiences with the security officers they encounter every day, be they owners and managers of establishments who are happy with the way their properties are protected or everyday citizens who see the officers as valuable resources in their community.

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