

[CONSULTANT DEBUNKING UNIT]

Boiling the Ocean

By Martin Kihn

NO SOONER DOES the Consultant Debunking Unit dip its toe back into the waters of consulting-speak than it stumbles onto jargon that turns out to be all wet.

The phrase in question gets its own special berth in ex-consultant Louis Gerstner's memoir of his years at IBM, *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* (HarperBusiness, 2002): "**Boil the Ocean**—to use all means and options available to get something done." And that's just a drop in the bucket: An A.T. Kearney consultant told author Betty Vandebosch his firm's approach was for "when you don't have time to do all the boil-the-ocean analyses." And after WorldCom settled its case with the SEC last year, a board member chastised critics, saying, "You could boil the ocean and not satisfy people."

Does this expression hold water? Smelling something fishy, the CDU fired up its sonar and charted a course for the truth, asking: How many consultants would it take to boil the ocean? And what would happen if they did?

Our first port of call was the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Experts there told us the ocean consists of 275 million cubic miles—roughly enough to fill 1 trillion boardrooms. Okay, but can you *boil* it? "I don't think so," said NOAA's Carmeyia Gillis. "Maybe a little part of it, if you're right on top of an active volcano or something." The problem is getting enough energy.

To find out how much, we consulted Dr. Michio Kaku, professor of theoretical physics at City University of New York. He confirmed our worst fears: "It would take a lot of energy"— 4.7×10^{26} joules, give or take. "It would probably require more energy than all the fuel on Earth." Could a particularly powerful consulting firm do it? "They wouldn't even know where to start," he snorted.

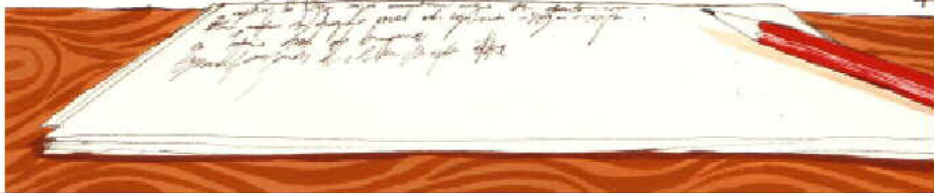
By our calculations, one day of "heavy consulting" in-

volves about 1×10^7 joules of energy. Assuming no vacations, this means every single person on earth would have to consult for more than 26 million years to actually "boil the ocean."

Not to mention what would happen if they succeeded. Our final ahoy was to Jeffrey Chanton, professor of oceanography at Florida State University. What would happen if consultants could boil the ocean? Chanton was not encouraging: "It would mean the end of the life we know on Earth. It is a terrible idea."

The phrase was popularized by Will Rogers, who was asked what could be done about U-boats. "Boil the ocean," he suggested. When pressed for exactly how, he is supposed to have said: "It's your job to work out the details!" Now that's true consulting-speak.

Martin Kihn is a management consultant and author of the incendiary exposé House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time (Warner Books, March 2005)



[Q & A]

60 SECONDS ON **SMALL TALK**

Debra Fine, engineer turned conversationalist guru, says small talk is the foundation of a business relationship. She teaches execs *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, also the title of her book (Small Talk Publishers, 2002). **FAST COMPANY** engaged her in some idle chatter.



FAST COMPANY: So is small talk a big deal?

FINE: Small talk isn't stupid. It's the appetizer for all relationships.

FC: Engineers aren't known for great conversation. How did you get to be so good?

FINE: By observing people, I learned little things about how to be better with people. I started reading books about it. You don't have to learn to love small talk. I don't love it still.

FC: What do you say first?

FINE: A good conversationalist has to assume the burden of other people's comfort. If I forget your name, whose problem is that? It's uncomfortable for me, but your comfort comes first, so I say, "You know, I forgot your

name, and I'm embarrassed."

FC: What are some good icebreakers?

FINE: My favorite, if I've met you before, is: "Bring me up to date on your life."

FC: This really works in business?

FINE: Lockheed Martin embraced "management by walking around"—but the executives didn't know what to say. Well you say simple things such as, "What's going on with the project?" Show an interest. Be sincere.

FC: How do you keep your skills fresh?

FINE: I make myself talk to three new people every week. It's like my diet.
—Maxine Clayton