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# Tough Calls: ATT and the Hard Lessons Learned from the Telecom Wars

*Dick Martin*

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## TOUGH CALLS

AT&T and the Hard Lessons Learned  
from the Telecom Wars

DICK MARTIN

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**Dick Martin : Tough Calls: ATT and the Hard Lessons Learned from the Telecom Wars** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Tough Calls: ATT and the Hard Lessons Learned from the Telecom Wars:

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Close to WorthlessBy Alberto DominguezThe back cover says that this book is "an up-front seat for the roller coaster ride" and a "look at how a great company tumbled" that will give us a "tour of ATT's wild ride" and "chart the dissolution of an American icon." Not one of those comments is

even remotely warranted. I was expecting to find interesting insider discussions of important questions like: \* Did ATT make any mistakes during the "trivestiture" in January 1996 (akin to giving away the wireless licenses to the RBOCs in the 1984 breakup)? Martin doesn't say, beyond talking about the PR fallout of the layoffs, which right off the bat were themselves only a side issue of the broader business strategy. \* Was pursuing cable the right strategy for Armstrong to implement? Probably, but Martin doesn't weigh in on this. \* Did ATT overpay for MediaOne? Of course, but again Martin is silent. \* Did ATT further compound its cable problem by putting poor executives (first Hindery and then Somers) in charge of broadband? Not a peep. \* How should ATT have handled the \$2 billion @Home acquisition? Silence. \* Were all these problems unavoidable due to ATT's pre-1996 succession planning problems? The only aspect of this question that Martin bothers to discuss is the PR fiasco surrounding Walter's departure. As if that were the most important aspect. He strikes me as having an exaggerated sense of his importance to the organization. ATT was a corporate icon for 130 years and had 4 million stockholders. Surely there were "hard lessons learned" as the subtitle claims, lessons that are valuable in the broader context of the modern corporation. However, from reading this book you would get the impression that ATT's only mistakes were in communications. Martin gives us an incredibly myopic view of just the PR efforts related to ATT's various missteps. Outside the PR business, who cares? Nobody! This could (indeed should) have been the business book with the broadest appeal in a decade. Instead we got a book that only PR people could stomach. It was so monumentally boring it literally put me to sleep. I bought this book to read about ATT; if I cared about Martin's actions I would have bought his biography instead. Despite naming the first chapter "Don't dance to the music of your own buzz" it seems that Martin has done exactly that. His book is the ultimate example of form over substance, confusing the important business questions facing ATT with the buzz surrounding him and the communication of the answers to those questions. Whether the answers were the right ones or not, Martin is unwilling (or unable) to say. If this book is an example of the caliber of executive thinking at the level of Executive Vice President at ATT no wonder the company sank so far so fast.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Could've been better  
By Fred Goodwin  
Review of Tough Calls: ATT and the Hard Lessons Learned from the Telecom Wars  
As a former employee of SBC, a spin-off of ATT back in 1984, and the company that later bought ATT in 2005, I read this book hoping to learn more about what happened to one of the greatest corporations the world had ever seen. I came away from reading it with more than a bit of disappointment. It's hard to pinpoint why, or exactly what I was expecting. Martin was VP of Communications, so he was certainly placed highly enough within ATT to have seen many of the events firsthand. But as I read his account, I kept getting the nagging feeling that a "mere" PR flack shouldn't be telling readers how to run a major corporation -- that's what CEOs do. Martin's job is to manage the company's reputation and prep his boss for interviews. Martin apparently thinks his mission is far broader, and that's OK. I just thought it a bit presumptuous of him to be second-guessing his bosses as if he could've done better or that ATT's fate would've turned out better had they only listened to him more. And of course, it's very possible I completely misread what Martin was getting at but those were my impressions having just finished the book, for better or worse.  
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americas\_team@hotmail.com  
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Dated  
By Robert H. Manna  
Dick's writing jumps all over the place. Trying to follow who did what to whom is extremely difficult. He tries too hard to make the case that he was a major player in some tough decisions, which he may have been. But putting himself forward all the time, on the same level as those he is praising and denigrating, weakens his position. However, there are some good stories about a turbulent time in telecom history. A must book for anyone interested in this area.

For better and for worse, few companies have been so prominently and constantly in the public eye as ATT. Through decades of growth and dominance, followed by its 1984 breakup and a litany of well-documented troubles, the company has soldiered on, by turns thriving and hanging on for dear life. Perhaps no individual experienced as much of the roller-coaster ride as Dick Martin, an executive vice president and 30-year ATT veteran with both a bird's-eye view of and a crucial role in the company's bumpy history. Tough Calls is the ultimate inside look at how ATT tried to cope with a "perfect storm" of fierce competition, economic turmoil, and punishing media scrutiny. Mixing unflinching candor with love for the company he helped steer -- and clear respect for many of his long-time colleagues -- Martin takes you through boardroom and back room to shed unprecedented light on: \* How the 1996 bungled announcement of 40,000 layoffs nearly destroyed the company \* How flawed succession planning precipitated sharp declines in ATT's stock price \* The never-ending, ugly turf battles with the "Baby Bells" brought on by the ATT breakup \* How even small interest groups can have a tremendous influence on business decisions, and how the media are largely responsible for determining what is business news on any given day Tough Calls is also a cautionary tale to be heeded by all businesses, using ATT's experience in the brutal telecom wars as a backdrop for new strategies in weathering unforgiving business conditions. Just a few of the lessons to be learned include: \* How to avoid the most common mistakes that executives make, such as being held hostage by unrealistic expectations, waiting too long to make critical changes, and building their celebrity rather than their credibility \* How to balance internal and external communications, and how and when to deal with the business media \* How to improve relationships between PR executives and the "suite" -- CEO, CFO, Chief

Counsel, etc.--and how to make public relations more strategic\* How to build and sustain favorable brand recognition and investor allure even in the face of bitter competition and unpredictable market conditionsAs candid and fascinating as it is constructive, Tough Calls is itself a call to attention and to arms, in preparation for the many battles that every business must eventually face, against fierce adversaries, and even within its own camp.

From Publishers WeeklyFormer ATT PR head Martin records his take on Ma Bell's descent from blue chip royalty, offering an insider's view of the corporation's struggle to reorient itself to a world in which its longtime cash cow--long-distance service--was becoming a profitless commodity. CEO Michael Armstrong's late '90s attempt to counter this trend by expanding into cable, wireless and business services forms the centerpiece of the book. Ultimately, ATT ran out of time as the overly exuberant market collapsed and the company had to break itself up once more, this time in order to stay afloat. The journey was highlighted by mega-deals, leadership missteps, PR blunders and outright fraud. Martin also offers an eye-opening analysis of the impact of MCI WorldCom's fraudulent financial statements, which, he says, lowered ATT's sales by \$5 billion per year. Martin lightens the endless carnage with portraits of the telecom industry's top players, describing, for instance, how a new ATT president was unable to tell the reporters at his first press conference the name of the long-distance company he uses at home. The result: "Run ATT? He apparently couldn't even spell it. And so forth." There are lots of good PR and leadership lessons here.

(Nov.)Forecast:Anyone sussing out ATT's remaining potential--or hurt by the telecom bubble's demise--is a potential customer here. Copyright copy; Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.From BooklistMartin, head of ATT's public relations during the tenure of CEO C. Michael Armstrong, describes Armstrong's leadership and that of his predecessor from 1996 to recently, when the company was acquired by Comcast. (Armstrong did not participate in the writing of this book.) The Telecommunications Act of 1996 was a death sentence for stand-alone, long-distance service, from which ATT derived 80 percent of its revenues and 100 percent of its profits. Armstrong arrived in 1997, assuming one of the greatest challenges in American business, and designed the right plan for the company. He would have survived some mistakes but lacked the time to overcome years of fraud perpetrated by his main competitor, MCI Worldcom. While Martin focuses upon missteps, we also learn of Armstrong's successes, including wireless and data business acquisitions and developing a \$4 billion outsourcing program in less than four years. Martin, a public relations veteran with 20/20 hindsight who conducted numerous interviews for this book, presents an important corporate story with lessons for those fighting today's battles. Mary WhaleyCopyright copy; American Library Association. All rights reserved "Buy this book for your boss this holiday season, both to entertain and educate. -- PRWeek November 2004"Dick Martin has written a surprisingly interesting, blunt, and dishy account of the crackup of Ma Bell." -- The Boston Globe"The book is loaded with fascinating"inside baseball" style tales, told artfully and with humor rarely found in a business book." -- DSL Prime (e-newsletter)"[the book]provides some priceless lessons for executives elsewhere on how to feed the insatiable media machine." -- Financial Times"This book is well written and full of details that would interest public relations managers and students.." -- Public Relations Dick Martin has written a powerful and important book of value to decision makers. -- The Journal of Business StrategyThis book is well written and full of details that would interest public relations managers and students. -- Public Relations